MOOKAJJI'S VISIONS

CHAPTER I

Who doesn't love stories? Many, among the educated, spend much of their time reading stories and novels. A well-written story may eventually bring fame to its author and once he gains it, whatever he may say or write acquires sanctity, equal to the words of the Vedas themselves. Well, I too am educated. I have had my schooling and for a few years, I even attended a college. Those days I was immersed, as it were, in stories. Any story was good enough for me if it could hold my interest. Stories such as the 'Arabian Nights' fascinated me. As I read through them and even some time after I finished them, my mind would be swarming with the fantastic incidents and wonderful episodes they narrated. Later, the details of the stories would gradually fade from my memory leaving only a few puzzling questions to haunt my mind. At the words 'Open sesame' did the cave really open? Did Ali Baba indeed exist? How could a doll ever open its mouth and speak or a magician transform a stone into a glittering diamond? I was too young to dismiss such things as utter nonsense. Moreover, my mind would accept even more fantastic stories. There were the numerous legends and myths which I was already accustomed to hearing in my childhood. Did I not implicitly believe that Narasimha, the 'Man-lion' burst forth from a pillar when demon Hiranyakasipu shattered it with a kick in anger. That young Dhruva, son of King Uttanapada ascended straight to heaven was no fiction to me. Neither were the curses that sages like Durvasa hurled at all and sundry. If those tales could be believed, why should I not accept the story of 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves' or the stories told by 'The Thirty-two Statues ?'

As I grew, read more and more, and observed strange events recurring in life around me, I came to believe that there was little harm in accepting as real the incredible stories cherished during childhood. Many more amazing things, almost unbelievable, are happening all around me even now. Let me tell you some of them though I must tell you beforehand that the names I have chosen to give to the characters in these stories are not the real ones.

Quite near my village, there lives a very wealthy person Timmappayya by name. People say, all his wealth has come from swindling helpless widows. No one has seen him do any worthwhile work. One day when a tenant's son stole a mango from his garden, he caught hold of the boy, tied him to a pillar with a rope and had him thrashed mercilessly. These were some of the tales I heard during my boyhood. Even at that time I never fully believed them. Ours is not such a god-forsaken village, for in it live a few elders known for their integrity and nobility. How could such people ever remain unmoved by Timmappayya's injustice ? But, as is quite well known, these noble villagers would welcome him to their houses and embrace him if ever he deigned to pay them a visit. They would indeed hail his visit as a great event likening it to 'Mother Ganga's visit to her utterly destitute children.' Why did they behave in that manner ?

When I was quite young, I put this very question about the notorious Timmappayya to my granny. But her replies were evasive. She would just say, ''Let him burn in hell ! Let us not pollute our ears hearing his name.'' This forthright reply puffed me up a bit. There was, I felt, at least one honest and courageous person in our village and that person was living in my very home !

Another time, a grave incident took place in my village. It was a case of dacoity and murder. The house of a close relative of Timmappayya was looted and burnt. Luckily the owner was not there at the time ; he had gone on a pilgrimage to Kasi. Had he been at home, he too would no doubt have been murdered, as was Subba, the servant. Subba's son was also there, sleeping by his side, when the dacoits came. Terrified at their sight the boy escaped in time and hid until his master returned. It was quite possible that he had seen the ghastly doings of the dacoits. Later, when he met his master, the boy evidently gave some description of the events to him.

Well, this was no ordinary incident ; it was a clear case of murder and dacoity, and naturally police officers from Coondapoor arrived on the scene for an enquiry. People of the village suspected that Timmappayya must have been at the back of the whole affair. But the fact that the police conducted their elaborate enquiry, sitting in the very house of Timmappayya, wrought many changes in their views. Poornayya, the owner, returned just three days after the incident, but, try as he might, he could not give any clue to establish the identity of the criminals. It appears that Subba's son, who returned from his hiding when the police came, cleverly said in his evidence before the police that during those three days he had not at all been present in the village.

The villagers just talked and talked. They first suspected Timmappayya of having instigated the dacoity and murder but then completely changed their view, saying that the dacoits were perhaps from some outside place. During those days, I remember hearing my granny exclaim "From outside ? It is ages since dacoits ever came here from outside !"

There was another unsolved mystery, that of Nagi, wife of Ramanna. Ramanna was and still is an oil-monger in our village. He owns a small mill worked by oxen. His one big mistake in life appears to have been 'his adventure in marrying and bringing home a village beauty'. Those were the actual words that my granny used while narrating the tale and they still cling to my memory. One day Nagi was quietly kidnapped by someone and after four years, was discarded in the streets like a plantain leaf after a meal. A long time after, a friend of mine, I remember, pointed her out to me at the local temple festival. "Look" he said "that's Ramanna's wife. She was a veritable Rambha. Now she is just a ghost of her old self !" My memory of her revived and I remembered certain things that were told about her some four years ago. I asked "Who do you think was responsible for all that?" My friend exclaimed "Her beauty, nothing else !" However, remembering what my granny had said I questioned again "But who really was at the bottom of it?"

He laughed and said : "Not Ramanna anyhow. She too was not to blame."

"Then who ?"

"It seems sometime after the marriage, Nagi's parents invited her to their home. Their object was nefarious. Apparently, they kept her hidden for some days and then in exchange for gold and silver sold her to some one. Once the fact became known, there was little to hide. The person, who had cast his eyes on her and bought her, lived with her openly. He spent lavishly on her, burying her as it were in sarees and ornaments, and made her forget her poor husband. In a way, this was perhaps fine, as far as it went, for had she remained the wife of the impoverished oilmonger, she would have been a draught ox and nothing more. Then too she might have run away and been on the streets. Anyway, the life with her paramour took a turn for the worse. Her charms faded, after the birth of two children and the lover no longer wanted her. After all, how long will the charms of youth last ?''

My friend would not divulge the name of the lecherous fellow who was responsible for all this and I didn't wish to press the point. Meanwhile, he continued saying, ''Once she became a shrunken fruit, his desires rambled elsewhere. He neglected her and she became disenchanted. Anyway, one day he cleverly made her entrust to him all the ornaments he had given her, promising to get them refashioned. Then he stopped going to her. He gave her nothing, not even the grains to cook her food. Hunger forced her to go and beg at his door-steps. Out came the rebuke ; 'You harlot, if ever you step into this yard again I'll break your legs'. He was one who would back his words with appropriate action. He was not one to be ignored. And today her condition is miserable. She has two young mouths to feed and so she is forced to take up sundry work to exist. But strangely enough, let me tell you, that ex-husband of hers still wants her ! In spite of being rebuked by his own mother first, he seems to have gone to her door and begged her to return. And out of shame, she wept and refused to go, saying ; 'This leftover dish is not good enough for you.' Then she ran away.''

"What a great soul!"

"Who? She, you mean?"

"Both he and she!" I exclaimed.

I think my friend kept that person's name a secret out of sheer fear of him. I was then about sixteen years old, with little experience of life; but I was deeply interested in this woman's miserable fate and that of her two young children. At my present age I can never scoff at a girl or boy eloping with someone. Such episodes are numerous both in life and legend. What roused my curiosity was that she was taken away from her husband by her own father out of greed for gold and silver, that she was then cast out and that she had to bear the burden of bringing up her children. To crown it all, she refused to go back to her husband in order to save him from social disgrace.

After my friend left me, I wanted to meet and talk to Nagi and so I searched for her in the large crowd gathered at the jathra of God Kapaleswara. I finally found her at a shop, purchasing half an anna worth of puffed rice for her children. She went to a quiet corner and sat there with them. I didn't dare go straight to her and so, walking around the place, approached her and stood there idly. From my pocket I took a two-anna coin and gently tossing it towards her remarked, "Please buy something for your children." Even today I shudder to recall the fire in her eyes and her rejoinder:

" I am no whore of yours!" she flared.

"Oh, poor woman, please do not be angry. I gave that coin to you out of pity for these children. If you don't want it, don't take it. I have heard of you and your miserable existence and so from sympathy I was moved to pity."

She did not say anything. I then added. "I belong to this place ; I am of Adiga's house. I am Mookajji's grandson."

She stared at me and slowly said: "Master, leave it to me to pay for my sins. I don't want anyone's money."

"Seeing the fate of those miserable little ones I have given it. I felt pity for them. You may reject it if you don't need it. It was not intended as a gift for you at all. It was for the children, for these little ones........."

I could see that her eyes became a shade wet with tears but staring at me still, she said in a determined manner: "I want nobody's money ; my children too don't need it. I can work; I have strong arms. I can provide for them and as they grow up they too will be able to work and earn." She got up and left the place immediately. Some of her words still haunt my memory for she said, "Master, you belong to a noble family. Your grandmother is a veritable goddess, but still I do not wish to be indebted to any soul. Please bear with me."

"I have no cause to be angry. Really, I am amazed at your courage!"

"I am like a eunuch, master."

"What do you mean?"

"I feel my position in life is like that of Shikandi the eunuch, who faced Bhishma in the Mahabharata story. I will pursue my vengeance, bring up my two kids and one day take them to my lord and say, "See these two souls" and then I will commit suicide."

"I don't understand what you are saying. I am just a schoolboy; why these harsh words, to me of all the people in the world?"

"No, no, I never meant to be harsh to you. I want you to convey these words to your uncle's ears; that is all," and then she walked away.

I felt as if Shikandi herself had cursed me. Her words made my mind boil and my body shivered. I had a feeling that something had gone quite wrong. I left the temple-yard and rushed home. Fear disturbed me. The moment I met granny I told her, "Somehow I feel miserable; let us go to '*Aswatha Katte*' ; tell me some story." We both came out of the house and rested on the seat built around the peepul tree. Granny looked into my eyes deeply. She watched me intently and read the misery writ on my face. She asked, "What is the matter with you? Today is a festival day." Sorrow welled from within me and taking up the two-anna coin out of my pocket, I placed it in her hands and said, "This miserable coin is the cause of it all. I went to give it in charity to someone, and instead of thanks I got back abuse ; abuse to me as well as to my uncle."

Granny took the coin and kept silent for a while. I then asked her, "Granny, how many uncles do I have ? Who are they? I don't remember my mother having any brothers at all." Without answering my questions, she asked, "You mean you gave this coin to some woman and she returned it ? But why did you give it to her at all ?" I then explained to her the entire episode.

Granny remarked, "She must have touched this coin. It is still quite hot. Nagi must have touched it. She has transferred to it all the heat that burned through her life."

"She abused my uncle and swore at him."

"Don't you know what happened to Nagi ? Her beauty was her curse. She was either the victim of her own desires or those of others when she was young. Now she has regained her senses and with it determination. She realises that it was wrong to have eaten the leavings of some one else's food."

"Yes granny—twice she spoke of leavings of food."

"She left her husband and ran away; that is how she became left-over food. The cause of this was your own uncle.........forget it all.........every one must bear his own burden of sin."

"Will she carry out her threat when her children grow up?"

"Oh, she will. She will be true to her words and she is a daring soul."

"Who, she? One who left her husband? It seems she rejected him, even when he begged her to return."

"She did so, because she was an honest soul. But child, who cares for honesty these days ? Those days are gone...... or perhaps, who knows? the past too was like this. If she survives with her sons and your uncle also lives that long—I am sure she will take the children to him and making them stand before him exclaim, "What if you have forsaken me? Will not people declare that these children are your offspring?"

"What hateful vengeance! It would be merciful if she stopped short of having him killed."

Granny laughed "Silly! Is death greater than honour?" After a little while, she began to tell me an old tale about our family. It was about my uncle who lived in a village called 'Irige', a few miles south of our village. I felt a little better after hearing the story. It was a relief to learn that this so-called uncle of mine was not a direct kinsman. I did not know before that my father had married twice and my mother was his second wife. The first wife had died long back, probably during her first delivery. It was one of her brothers that soiled Nagi's life. What the devil do I have to do with him or what chance even to remember him? But for granny I would not have known of his existence even. I did not know where he was, what he was doing. I was greatly relieved to learn that Nagi's curse would not touch me in the least.

I have dwelt on the stories because it is often difficult to separate truth from fiction and sometimes truth is stranger than fiction as in the case of poor Nagi. I, who have been fond of all sorts of stories, find it indeed difficult to accept many of them as true or false. In the case of true-life stories there is further the danger, that by some queer streak of coincidence we may directly or indirectly be involved in them, as it happened when I learnt that some remote uncle of mine was the cause of Nagi's downfall.

As one grows older and gathers more experience, one slowly loses interest in mere fiction and fantasy. One wants that genuine human experience should inspire writers to create works of fiction. But I confess that I am no votary of fiction as much as my friend Janardhan, who was my classmate in school as well in college for some time. He is a voracious reader of books. He often recommends me books that he considers good for my reading. I confess however that the books do not impress me. But, I am still full of enthusiasm for the many stories that my own granny has been telling me from time to time. Even when they sound fantastic they seem true.

At this point, let me introduce my friend Janardhan, both as a character in this long tale and as a critic of my attitude towards stories in general.

Both of us were born in the same village and have been so to speak, friends from our very childhood. He used to call me 'Subba' instead of by my full name and I in turn addressed him as Janna, instead of his proper name Janardhana. We attended the same elementary school, then the same high school and college. In the college he chose 'arts' as his subject, while I preferred history. During holidays, I would often visit him, and he too called on me. Even with these things in common our viewpoints on many matters differed. One day he brought a Kannada novel, entitled ''Kokke Kannu'' or the ''hooking eye''. Its heroine is an extremely beautiful girl who by sheer coquetry, ensnares a rich and handsome youth. Her first tactics is a love-letter and he falls hopelessly in love with her. This love grows beyond bounds. However, one day he returns to his village and out of respect for his parents is compelled to marry a girl of their choice. His wife is almost like Sita in devotion to her wedded Rama. Afterwards they settle in Bangalore. Unfortunately, his first love, along with her father also moves to Bangalore due to the latter's transfer to that place. There she comes to know of her lover's marriage to some other girl. She, in desperation, takes poison. She is rushed to a hospital, where luckily she is saved from death by a doctor. The man who was the root cause of her despair, happens to be a friend of the doctor, from whom he learns about his first love's attempted suicide.

Later on, the doctor himself marries the girl out of pity. This brings the first lovers again together. The lover sends his wedded wife home. The love between them grows. The doctor friend comes to know of it and so on the story develops. The novelist dwells on their love life, likening them to Pururava and Urvashi of pauranic fame. He shows little charity towards the village girl, who unwittingly married this Pururava. Besides, he has made her unattractive, stubborn and given her other bad traits. I found it impossible to plod through the story till the end, and since my friend narrated it to me, I was saved the bother. My friend was over-exuberant about the novel and I, losing patience remarked, ''Shut up!''

''But why?''

''All sorts of improbabilities are huddled together here. The characters seem to dance to the tune of the writer. They don't behave like people, who have minds of their own.........stupid improbable situations.''

''Why should not they happen? Such things are quite normal. When a man meets a woman.........''

''I know quite well how strong the attraction between a man and a woman is. True, many strange things can happen between them, but I fail to understand how they could ever have acted in the manner described by your author.''

''Well, then, let us drop it. It's a simple difference of opinion. Why quarrel over it?'' So, he gave in. But from then onwards, he stopped bringing books to me. He had the feeling that I could never sense the fine nuances of life and that my sensitivity had been dulled by reading history. He accused me of never being able to understand the romance of Shahajahan and Mumtaj, although I could reel off the death and birthdates of kings and even name the day when Shahajahan's tomb was finished. To end matters, I kept mum.

In spite of this disagreement, he continued to be my friend. How could we forget our childhood ties? I keep an open ear to what he says but I never argue. Argument for what purpose? If I told him of something that had really happened he would remark 'May be'. Even if I deliberately uttered falsehood he would say, 'May be'. I have no intention of making him appear a fool although I am aware of his deficiencies. Even if someone tells him a highly colourful tale with improbable situations, he will never doubt the veracity of its narrator. If, instead, we discuss with him a real event or problem of life involving deceitful behaviour or a difficult plight, and then remark—"Why do such things happen at all ?" he will carelessly remark, "Why do you bother about such things?" What he wants really is peace of mind. He will not accept anything as fact, if it disturbs his mind. Promises of good life mean much to him although they may never turn out to be true. So far as stories are concerned—he enjoys tales involving intrigues, deceits and scheming but they should all end happily—that is all he wants.

I have dwelt on various types of stories—oral, written and from real life. Some of them, unrealistic though they are, somehow satisfy us. Why should Rama have killed Ravana ? He fought Ravana and killed him in battle because Ravana had kidnapped Sita. When he was about to regain her, what did he do ? He wanted to test her purity in fire. One feels distressed at such a situation and disgusted about Rama's behaviour. But once Sita comes out unscathed from the fire, we seem to forget all else that had taken place before. We want Sita to be saved and the story writer has saved her. But how ? Only after throwing her into a fire, and then declaring to the world her purity of character. What eyewash !

Our daily life is full of such irrationalities. Even if there is none to save us from our trouble, we need to create a saviour. Only then can we bear with Rama's highly suspicious attitude towards Sita. When Nagi, with her two children, became destitute, her husband, out of pity, went to her and asked her to go home with him—we just laugh at that fellow's madness for a woman ! I think that not a single soul would raise an eyebrow at my uncle's madness for that woman. When a new flower came his way, my uncle just threw away the old faded one. None would have rebuked him for it.

Even with all these explanations I am not sure if I have been able to convince you about my purpose in narrating to you this tale. Between realism and unrealism the boundary is flimsy; too thin. There is very little difference between truth and untruth. One appears just like the other and one becomes almost like the other. Two closely related things appear to me to be far apart from each other. I look with wonder on many such riddles of life, and this attitude has been growing in me, all because of my granny's influence. She has ever so many dreams, dreams not due to sleeping hours, but day dreams born out of her insight. They are of a sort that you and I may not experience and so I call them visions. Before I share with you a few of her visions, I must tell you something about my granny. All the things previously narrated happened some fifteen years ago, but not so the ones that I shall narrate hereafter.

The person whom I have been calling "granny" is in no way my direct grand mother. She is the daughter of my great-grandfather and the sister of my father's father. Though she was born in the same house in which I too was born, there is no reason why she should have stayed so close by like that peepul tree. She certainly could have resided in her husband's house, there spreading roots and branches like a veritable jack or tamarind tree. I compared her metaphorically to a jack or tamarind tree, because of her apparently static life. Both jack and tamarind grow to a venerable age. Timber made of jackwood lasts long. So too, a pestle made of tamarind wood, as it does not wear away. In a way granny is more like tamarind as her words are sour-sweet. But, instead of growing tall elsewhere, she has become a part of our house and like the roots of the peepul tree entwining themselves to the main stem.

My great-grandfather named her Mookambika after the goddess at *Kollur*, which became 'Mooki' for short. Mooki would have been some three years younger than my own grand father. I don't remember my grandfather at all; he died long ago or otherwise, I would have run to him and sought his help in clarifying ever so many of my doubts arising from granny's utterances. What little I know of her childhood is not direct information; it is only secondhand and came to me out of the hazy memories of her daughter-in-law. Whenever I wanted some points to be made clear and queried granny, she appeared to be least anxious to say anything about herself.

She was given in marriage when she was ten years old. Her husband was only fourteen or fifteen at the time. After marriage, Mookambu moved to her husband's house in a village called Chambur, some nine miles away. Within a few months, her husband died of typhoid fever. So ended her married life at that tender age and so my great-grandfather bought her back to his house, now our home where she has been living ever since. I have been referring to this house as our house or my house, which has been standing there all these years, in the same place, with minor changes wrought by later generations. I do not know what effect this calamity had on her. But one thing I have been told is—that she became practically mute since that time. Because of this she was given the name Mookajji (or dumb granny). Although she didn't care to talk she was never reluctant to work. A mere 'yes' or 'no' sufficed for her purpose. Today I realise that there was nothing strange about her dumbness, for it is sheer wonder that she survived at all, after that childhood catastrophe. Life around naturally ceased to have any attraction for her and as I learnt later, she rarely left her village.

When my grandfather in his old age wanted to go on a pilgrimage to Kasi, he, it seems, invited her to join but she said 'No'. Her terse reply was "The god that is there is here too," and that ended the conversation.

My grandfather's days were over, and granny occupied his place in the house as sure and firm as a wall. After the death of my grandfather, I am told my grandmother too, soon passed away. My father, I learnt, grew on granny's lap. Her eyes witnessed a panorama of sorrows and joys. This included the marriage of my father, his becoming a father and then his losing his wife, that is, our mother. I remember a sentence that escaped my granny's mouth, when my own father died : "The call comes to each one some day or the other. Only I seem to miss it." Such words heard when I had been just orphaned shook me to my very bones.

Her behaviour and speech that day were extremely mysterious. She walked up to my father's corpse, sat there. She shed no tears but exclaimed, "You have done one good thing, by sending her in advance of you. Don't you worry about these kids. I will look after them; good-bye." Seeing me shivering and crying my heart out, she rebuked "Where is your manliness gone ? Who in this world is permanent, you, I or anyone else ? Go and light his funeral pyre. All this is a dream, a play. Dreams are what we take them to be, good or bad. If you take them as illusions they are illusions and if you take them as real they are real."

"Child, let me tell you—don't we experience dreams; this life is also a dream. So are joys and sorrows; so is the world;

so are God and such like spirits. They become such as we wish them to be. Be strong of mind.''

''Why are you afraid? Go, bid him goodbye. Aren't you a man, a son?'' I was crushed by her words and out of shame obeyed; completed all the funeral ceremonies in due course. For quite a long time to come, I never heard such heroic words from her. But that day, just that instant, I felt my granny was a totally different person.

Even after my father's death, she saw to it that I was not burdened with the affairs of the household. Never did she allow them to interfere with my and my brother's education. When I was back from college, though I was quite young, she pressed me to marry and found a bride for me. I just cannot imagine how she managed the house till then. She managed to look after the farm too. I can never forget the love, affection and protection she afforded me and that resulted in an inextricable bond between us. Till I was almost sixteen, she used to tell me and my younger brother Narayana many a story. She would make us laugh and weep and then again tell us something that would dry our tears. Sometimes, I would ask her, ''Granny, is this all true? Did it really happen?''

''My child, a story is just a story,'' she would say.

''So it is not true!'' I would exclaim in despair.

''What is it you want? You want it to happen that the cow Punyakoti falls a prey to the tiger?''

''No''

''You don't want the tiger to leap up and die?''

''No''

''And then? In this world of ours, one life depends on another. Either the cow survives or the tiger; never both.''

''Both should live,'' said I.

"You want the tiger to feed on grass? Even grass has life. If I am to stretch the story further—at the sight of the cow, the grass would have to go to its child to say goodbye and then return."

I, in turn, have repeated to my wife Sita, after she came fresh from her parents' home, many stories that I learnt from granny. Whenever she felt pained on hearing some dismal news or the other from her home, I would pose as granny and try to comfort her by repeating bits of granny's philosophy. I would say, "True, life is a dream. It may be a play too. So long as the play lasts, we put on some garb and play our roles. Let us just play a role that would fit us most." Well, of course, this was my own version of what I had heard from granny.

Today, I am grown up and married, and have become the father of two, yet I feel like a youngster before my granny. But, one thing—I never have found her telling stories to my children as she did to me and my brother, when we were young, Since the time my wife Sita entered our house, she has quietly retired, leaving the management of the house to her. Even when my father lived, she never tried to lord it over anybody. She too must have been fed up with the miseries of this world. Before I finish, I should tell you one thing that has hurt me most—it is the attitude of visitors to granny. They seem to entertain no regard for her at all and people of our village also think that my granny is senile.

There was one thing peculiar about her. If anyone placed some object in her hands, she would close her eyes for a few moments and then begin to talk to herself as if in a dream. Hearing such monologues, perhaps, some have remarked, "Senility has set in in Mookajji. She talks to herself and begins to rant nonsense; there is virtually no end to it''. When my own friends and relatives speak of her in this manner I am indeed hurt very much. My experience with granny is different. I was married at twentyfive. Since then I have been the master of my house and my wife Sita, its mistress. My granny often soliloquizes to herself. My children would go to her and place something in her hands, and report to their mother whatever granny said. They would say, ''Mother, granny says she met a hefty person; so hefty that...'' then they would grin. In such situations it would be very difficult for Sita to silence her naughty children.

''You please don't go to her. She may see something or the other; of what concern is it to you ?''

''Ma, she utters big big lies''.

''Won't you shut up!'' Many a time she has to silence them by threats. If my own children take her to be a madcap I can hardly help it. But such an idea pains me most, because of the deep relationship that has grown between us. One day I was sitting by her side, on the *aswatha katte*, when I found her soliloquizing, without even being aware of my presence. 'Oh, one should never grow to such a ripe age', was the thought that suddenly crossed my mind. The next moment she said, ''My child, do you feel that I am a big burden to you ? Why are you thinking of my death?'' and then she laughed. My heart shuddered and fear seized me. I begged her to forgive me for the momentary thought I entertained about her. ''True, I felt so,'' I said, ''when I heard you talking to yourself, but not because you were a burden to me. For a moment, I felt that one shouldn't live after one loses control over one's own faculties''. Then I felt a deep remorse.

"I do realise that. I know you too well. I just poked fun at you when that thought flashed through your mind."

"How did you come to know of it ?"

"At the moment, your thoughts were almost mine."

"What is it that you talk so often to yourself ?"

"I see so many apparitions. I pass my remarks about them Because when such visions occur to me I forget myself. May be that also is a sort of dream."

One day, when my granny was soliloquizing, I hid behind her and listened to whatever she muttered. The words were strange. She seemed to describe some event as it unfolded before her very eyes. Suddenly I enquired, "Granny, how do you feel ?" and immediately she woke up from her visions.

"Did you call me ?" she asked.

"Yes, it is time for food. Please come" I said. She came home, finished her meal and took a nap for an hour or two. Mostly, she spends her time sitting in the verandah of our house and when tired of it, she goes to the bund of the peepul tree. If today I am to recapture the many dream tales or visions she described to me, I am sure they would beat hollow the many mythological stories that I have heard and read. More than that—granny's stories speak rhe greater truth.

I think granny is past four score years.

CHAPTER II

Now, I wish to gradually unfold to you the story of my village. It is a village set in the midst of forests and hills and lies hardly a few miles away from the Nagankalu Ghats of the Sahyadri Mountain belt. The spread of the village is not more than two or three square miles, within which lie scattered less than a hundred roofs. But it is quite representative of all the castes and tribes that inhabit our region. There are the fishermen, the Kudubis (hill tribes), Billavas, oilmongers, Brahmins, Jains and even outcastes and members of groups of questionable virtue. Each caste is represented by four or six houses, making marriage contacts within the village itself impossible. For that, we have to deal with neighbours, both for finding brides, and giving them in marriage. It is this peculiar situation that made my granny exclaim one day that she was the only person destined to be born, bred and be still hovering between life and death, within the same village.

The one place she cherished most was the *aswatha katte*, situated a few yards before my house. I remember asking granny one day why she was so fond of sitting on the *aswatha katte*. Her reply was something like this: "My boy, this tree, like me, was born here and grew up here alone. Though for just a little time I was away in my husband's home, ever since my return I, too, have been living here. I have grown fairly old though not as old as the tree. Who knows its age?

May be a thousand years or even ten thousand. But it is certain that this tree has been here as long as our own village Moodoor has been in existence."

I was then a school-going lad and arrogantly I remarked, "Granny, what's so important about our village?"

She laughed and then said, "Why, it looks so poor today. Long ago a great town stood here. It was bigger than the great '*Ikkeri*' of the past. You can still find numerous fallen walls, compounds and so many similar things over a spread of three miles or more. All these ancient ruins are now covered by the forest."

This roused my curiosity and I made it a point to wander all over the forest and fields of my village with my friend Janna. Slowly I discovered that what my granny said was true. Very close to my home, I located the ruins of old temples and pavilions. There were hundreds of foundations of ruined old houses, strewn about the entire area of hills and jungles. The temples and buildings did not appear to have been large. I think the Ishwara temple that still remains in tact is the biggest among them. But in the past there probably were many more temples. One could guess that there would have been at least three hundred houses and probably a population of three thousand. This was great excitement for me. Without betraying my excitement I went on describing everything I had seen to my granny. She nodded in affirmation and said "Oh yes, during the olden days this was a huge town but times have changed and, none even recalls our ancient village." On a later occasion, she remarked laughingly, "Why should anyone think about this village or me or you for that matter? Rising and falling is the way of life. In between the two we struggle like stray dogs, and when the day for our departure comes, we just pass away."

I recall still another saying of my granny: ''In the olden days Moodoor had another name too. Mispronunciation has made Murur, Moodoor. Moodoor means eastern habitation, whereas our village lies exactly in the middle region. In the eastern stretch, in earlier days stood on old *Basari* tree with an earthen platform around its base. In our village we had the '*katte*' round the peepul tree. The western portion was then called 'Boodi katte' (platform of ashes). I don't know what tree stood at its centre, or why it was called so. I know only of this *aswatha katte* which still survives. I never ventured out of the village. I would feel uneasy, if ever I moved out of my village.''

Out of curiosity I asked her, ''Granny, aren't you ever tired of staying in one place so long?''

"I like it this way,'' she said and laughed.

''What made you laugh?'' I querried. When she told me about the three different *kattes* (platforms), it intrigued me for I felt that she would not have mentioned them without some purpose. Laughingly she remarked, ''Time is not ripe for me to seek the *boodi katte;* that is why I am waiting here by the *aswatha katte!* Instead of *aswatha katte* this should have been named *bal katte*. It would then go well with the other two—symbolizing conception (basari) and destruction (ash).''

''I cannot make head or tail of it !''

Once again laughing, she explained that the name '*basari katte*' meant birth, and *boodi katte* or ash mound meant death. Hence, it would have been apt if the middle stage—that is, existence-were termed 'bal . 'Muroor', the old name of our village would then symbolize the three phases of life.

Then only my naive mind could understand her joke about birth, life and death. But, somehow, granny resented people coming to visit us, betrayed signs of discomfort and straight away walked into the house and vanished from sight whenever a visitor appeared. Till these strangers departed, she never came out. Even when our own friends or relatives called on us, they dared not speak to her. From among a large number of visiting relatives and friends, I have seen just one or two elderly women, who would make it a point to seek her out and touch her feet before leaving our house. Even they dared not engage themselves in conversation with her. I know one elderly person from amongst granny's friends who used to refer to her as a godly person, a real divinity.

Our home is a small affair consisting of myself and my brother Narayana, four years younger. On my father's death, I put a stop to my studies and returned home; but my brother continued with his. When I married and my wife came to fulfil the role of the mistress of the house, granny blessed her heartily but from then on hardly showed any inclination to converse with her. .All conversation was cut to bare essentials. My younger brother was never chummy with her. If ever he intoned 'granny' once three more days would have to pass before he spoke to her once again. He too perhaps shared with others the belief that granny was soft in the head. My two children, Kittu and Chandra, were free with her. She talked to them but somehow the children did not believe her words at all.

My younger brother completed his studies at Mysore. He then tried for a job in Shimoga. When he comes home during holidays, he stays just for four days. Moodoor has no charm for him. But when he comes home he casually sits beside granny out of sheer habit, but never asks her about her health. It was on one such occasion she remarked to him, "My little child, I hear that you have finished your studies. Now get married and then find some job and live happily.''

He, in fun, said, ''You want me to stay at home like my brother?''

In reply, she said, '' Why should I want that? I know quite well that you are not destined to live here.''

We are not many in the house and with our limited income we can lead only a frugal existence. Here, time passes at a leisurly pace and sometimes it becomes indeed difficult to spend it. Granny has however spent practically all the eighty years of her life here only. I have not developed a liking for my fellow-villagers in whom I often see meanness and deceit. The reports I hear about them make me chary of developing any intimacy with them. The one exception to this is of course my friend Janardhan, whose casual visit during the holidays makes me quite happy. Yet, all our conservation is mere idle talk. He taunts me saying, ''Oh, you blessed man, why did you go through college at all? Do you not get books to read, or a newspaper or two to while away the time?''

And my reply to him is, ''Whenever I itch for stories, I always have my granny. She is a storehouse of stories. Her stories can still entertain me.''

When I say so, Janna's face falls and he remarks, ''Is it true that your granny has lost control of her mind completely?''

''She has been the same to me all along; no more, no less.''

''Yes, yes, she has been the same all along; but still people say—her soliloquising has become endless.''

''What you mean is—that those who soliloquise are nuts.''

''Who but nuts do that?''

"Quite true, but even if one keeps mum, won't the mind wander about here and there? This has happened to me and to you also. There is this difference—granny speaks out what she feels, you and I don't........ that's all. Your inference is that to speak out one's mind is to lose control of one's faculties. Is that what you mean?"

My friend laughed, for at last, he realised the limitation of his measuring rod.

Janardhan may well entertain any feeling for himself, but why should he reveal them to me? I felt that I should desist from speaking to him if he called on me again. I was angry that he showed utter disrespect for my granny. She is now more than eighty and her only happy years were perhaps the ten years of her childhood. The later seventy or more years of widowhood must have been terrible to her, too painful, too frightful even to contemplate. The very idea of being a widow-an ill-omen to be avoided by all—would have shaken her being to the core. During those hellish days, I came to know, her brother, my grandfather, was the one person to give her some solace in life.

My father too looked after her well and my mother, it seems, had immense regard for her, even though from her observations of her, she had doubts about my granny's devotion to God. When so many religious ceremonies used to take place in our house, it seems granny showed the least interest in them. There are two partially ruined temples in our village, but these never seem to have attracted her. Not that she never went there; but whenever she went there, she would go round the sanctum in the customary way, but never cared to wait till the whole *pooja* ceremony was over.

None saw prayer beads in her hands, and no one ever heard her say even mutteringly "I bow down to Shiva", or something like it. Seeing all these, my mother suspected that granny had lost faith in God, because of her own sufferings. The suspicion was planted in my mind by my mother before she died—and one day, I questioned granny about it. I was, like my brother, a little vain, because I had gone to college. One day I observed granny circumambulating the peepul tree, which I thought to mean that she revered God. She stopped walking and sat down without bowing down, or joining her palms together in worship. I went to her straight and sat beside her. Of her own accord, she asked me, "What is in your mind?"

Cunningly I said: "No thought of any sort. What should I worry about? I have finished my examinations and my worrying days are over. Why should I worry at all !"

"Then you have decided to test me since your own examinations are over. Is it not so?"

This question upset me completely. She had hit on the thought that had occupied me a while ago.

"I know, I know. You came to find out whether your granny believed in God or not. I sensed it and purposely walked round the peepul tree. No or yes?"

"Sensed it?"

"Yes, surely. Sometimes I do sense thoughts in advance. I sensed your doubts. Are you now satisfied?"

"Not so, granny; my satisfaction means nothing. Do you mean to say that you didn't walk round the tree as one does around God?" I questioned.

"Can one ever circle round God ? I circled round the tree, which is certainly older than I am. Just as I circle round time I circled round the tree.'

"You mean to say one need not circle round God?"

"Let those who want to do it, do it."

"Which means.........?"

"If they feel that God is so small a being, let them......"

I burst out in impatience :"Granny, tell us something. I am grown up, but I know that I lack in wisdom. If I am in error please correct me. I want to know for certain if ever you believed in God."

"God exists, if you believe so. People have had that belief and this tree was planted by such believers. When I was young, my mother circled round this tree, leading me by hand. You saw me do just that, a little while ago. My mother would beg of the tree so many things. Before wisdom dawned on me I, too, begged it for something or the other. I might have begged for a husband and when I got one, thought that God gave him to me. Then later on, I began to feel that all this was silly. Even belief is a type of madness. I went round the tree by sheer force of habit. Sometimes, it gives me some peace of mind.

"If I sit down here on the *katte* I begin to realise that I am linked to many many early generations. The more I turn toward the past, the more I feel people and lives have existed here for thousands of years. If I delve still deeper, there comes a period when nothing ever existed at all. Since the creation of man on earth, people have joined together in creating a god for themselves. I don't know what He feels and does. For sure He would not go on keeping a watch for one who believes in Him and one who doesn't. Aren't there a vast number of animals who never think of God? Yet, He has kept them alive. There is no reason why He should come searching after us, in the manner we go in search of Him. In fact—we ask Him ever so many questions and then we ourselves begin to answer them. Who can stop us? When it suits us we say it is God's will, when it doesn't, we say it is '*our karma*.' ''

Her way of talking did not satisfy my simple mind. Just as my mother had her own doubts about granny, my wife Sita, too, has such doubts. I felt that granny was indifferent towards matters pertaining to God and so stopped talking. At this granny asked, ''Why have you become silent?''

''Granny, I cannot understand anything you say.''

''How? My knowledge cannot be so deep. What can I know, I, who have come to attend a two-day fair?''

''That means?''

''You see, people come to attend a village fair, finish their work quickly and walk away. What would happen if they developed a taste for gossip and hung on? They would then forget the very purpose of their visit. All of us are like that. Even I seem to behave that way. We never know anything of God, but pretend we do. I feel quite certain that it is a matter that I can never learn or realise. But still I rant that God's wish is this, it is that and so on. Sheer childish talk. His will, He alone will know—not you or I.........never.........never.........''

''Granny, don't elders say that all this is Paramatma's sport?''

''All right; say it is; what next?''

''He makes us dance.''

''Agreed.''

''Should we not dance as he bids us?''

''Can you understand what He wants you to do? How then do you say that you dance to His bidding? The words, 'What He means' are just what we feel about it.''

This conversation with granny never convinced me or satisfied me; on the other hand, I felt more confused. I sat quietly because I could think of nothing. Then granny asked me to go home as visitors had arrived. I would have gone away without being asked to do so. I knew full well that I had no capacity for discussing such things with her, or even of understanding her. I had just a little while ago noted someone passing before our very eyes, and I felt that granny had noticed it and so she requested me to go home. I went home and found Ramanna, the oilmonger sitting in our yard! ''I am returning from Irige,'' he said, ''after disposing of oil.''

''You came from Irige? But, from which direction did you come? Did you pass by the *aswatha katte?* That is why granny sent me here; she had seen you.''

''No, no, I didn't enter that way. I came by the garden path, then I climbed into the yard from behind the cowshed. I have one full measure of fine coconut oil which I wanted to give you.''

I really didn't understand how granny could have guessed Ramanna's arrival. Probably she wanted to get rid of me and said something which by chance was true. Then, dismissing granny from my mind, I talked with Ramanna and bought oil from him.

I asked him to come again within a fortnight. ''Then copra will be ready. Take it and bring us oil in return,'' I said. He rested there for a while and asked for a drink. My wife brought him some water and jaggery. Since he is a constant visitor to our house, he began to chat with her about his domestic affairs. Having no work to do, I picked up a billhook, and went to our garden where I engaged myself in pruning thorny hedge plants, shoved them to a corner and said to myself, ''No use pruning them now, with the coming rains they will send out long shoots. The hedge will be a regular bush. Even then, its thorns should not tear away a passerby's flesh.'' All this I said to myself for there was no one else to listen. This thought made me laugh. I realised that I was granny's fitting progeny, as I, too, soliloquise.

When I came home my wife was still talking with the oilmonger. She was remarking, ''So yours is an oath ! You haven't married since. Now that you have grown fairly old, though not too old, quite old.........''

''Old or gold-years have rolled by. I am past forty. My house is full. There are enough kids too, though they don't belong to me. What does it matter? Ours is a matriarchal family. They are my sister's six children. Off and on my sister comes and stays with me. When she does, she and her children all toil with me in the fields. However much we toil, we find it difficult for there are too many mouths to feed.''

''You may have several nieces and nephews but it is not the same as having your own children. These nephews come to you when food becomes scarce in their house. Then, when you too have less to eat, they migrate to their father's place, that is all.''

''I think that in fact fate itself has decreed that she should die in the streets. Whenever I think of her, I boil with anger and sometimes with sorrow too. But lady of the house, for sure, I swear I want no other woman's hand.''

Presumably not inclined to talk further, my wife went into the kitchen and the oilmonger departed. I was bored and left for my friend Janardhan's home. As I passed before my house, I found granny sitting in the verandah. She must have just then returned from the *aswatha katte*. Anticipating some remark from her, I told her that I was going to Janna's house and would return soon.

"To Janna's house ?" she asked.

When I walked away with quick steps I overheard her saying, "Well, the house will of course be there."

Having trudged nearly a mile by the edge of the low-lying fields I reached Janna's house but found that he was not at home. I quickly retraced my steps, went for a long stroll and returned home only at dusk.

Seeing granny seated on the verandah of the house, I said, "Granny, your warning came true." Then I went to the well, washed my feet and performed what was an apology for the evening prayers. On my return I found granny holding something in her hands, leaning against a pillar and muttering something. She could not have observed my coming, for, even when I silently walked up to her, her mutterings continued. I couldn't make out anything of what she was saying, but my curiosity was aroused. I went back a few feet, and sat on the other side of the pillar. Carefully listening, I could hear her and make out a few words. Listening intently I discovered that she was speaking to some one.

"Yes, you want this," she was saying, "you haven't at all forgotten it. How could you afford to forget it ? Was it her present to you? She took immense care in weaving it. She brought the cane from the forest, split it, cleaned it and then wove it into shape. It would serve you as a betel-leaf container. Her love for you is in no way small. She is quite a good woman.

"But, why are you angry? Because I call her, who forsook you, a good woman? She came to your house full of love, and lived with you because of her love for you. Till that woeful hour, when she left you, she never quarrelled with you. On the other hand, you are the one lacking in character. Your talk was full of vanity, the vanity of man towards woman. Do you remember what you said? 'I will not be beguiled by your charms, or by your magic?' Such words came from your mouth whether only in fun or from the heart. They did come out. One day, didn't you scold her like this: 'What if you possess a lovely body? A woman who comes to my house will have to toil like a draught-ox. You shall not eat if you do not work. If ever you shirk work, I'll beat you to death.' Didn't you say these very words ?

"Didn't she taunt you back saying, 'Who is afraid of work?' Did she ever shirk? But look, did you on your part treat her properly? For full three years, she toiled as your wedded wife, but then did you ever present her with a new saree? Is she not after all a woman? Is it not natural for her to love clothes and ornaments? Did you hope that she would trail behind you in a loincloth such as you wear when you work the oil press? It is possibly your callous neglect that made her pour out her tale of misery to some one else. That other person or persons must have encouraged her to teach you a lesson. So she ran away. You may have searched for her intensely, but it was late. The cow had already fled to to the tiger's den. She belonged to that village. Seenappa must have cast his eyes on her long before this. When she ran away from your home, he must have met her and hidden her somewhere. By the time you realised your folly, and your own pride yielded to sobriety, things had gone too far and in the wrong direction. You came to your senses only after learning that she had been netted by Seenappa.

"But, of course, you found her and begged her to return but she told you to give up any such hope. Those words were uttered in anguish and not in anger. They were the outcome of a realisation that she had jumped into the river! You then gave her up as hopeless.

But Ramanna, I really admire what you did later. That Seenappa had ruined many a family. When young, he used to come to this house too. He is not very old. He is an ill-bred monkey. Whenever he came to our house, I felt as if a hot wind was blowing over me. After a time, this wicked Seena discarded Nagi and enticed someone else. All the wealth he inherited from his father has been wasted in this way. When he was young, no one gave him proper advice. Craze for woman, is like craze for drink. What happened to Nagi then? She became the mother of two children and finally became destitute. I don't know where she lives now, but surely she didn't accept your hand again, as she felt that she was discarded food...True, for a short period her mind was unchaste. It was all due to youthful vanity. That was also what had made you drive her away. You behaved like a rogue who couldn't provide his wife with food and decent clothing.

"Certainly, you would not have treated her that way, if you had had a foreboding of all this. For that very reason, you have stood firm of mind to have her and her alone, or none at all. In a way, you have no wants—you have your sisters, nephews with you. You can work hard......But still, your life is joyless; you are like the sugarcane pulp after the juice has been squeezed out.

"After all, forty years is not too old an age. You can still get some girl or the other. Of course, you may not get a haughty beauty like her. If you want to marry, marry by all means. He has created that inexplicable mystery, from the very beginning of life. People say that the world is an illusion, 'maya' created by God. I too, feel that this world is a product of magic, compounded by man and woman, male and female. But for that, this world would be dreary. It is because male and female sexes were created that a thousand joys and a thousand sorrows were born; a thousand tastes and distastes were born. From deep inside the living being arose the desire to exist, to strueggle and be victorious at the end. These together make the 'thing' called life.''

I listened with surprise to so much talk. I could guess that it all referred to Ramanna, because his name too was spelled out. I also came to know the name of the other person, my uncle. I was reminded of Nagi's name, that had faded and disappeared from my memory in the last fifteen years. Her children must have grown up now and might even be living somewhere nearby. My mind began to dwell on the memory of my uncle, and the numerous tales told about him. He had lost everything and sold his property to one of his brothers. I heard he was living with one of his sons in some place or the other. From granny's talk I could establish that one of the childhood stories I had heard was indirectly or directly linked to our own home.

This set me thinking that one day I should go to my uncle's village, discover the whereabouts of Nagi, and find out what had happened to her oath and all such things.

Someone's quick footsteps were heard and granny said, ''Probably Ramanna is back. He had forgotten the betel case which his goddess had given him.''

Certainly, Ramanna himself was there. I had even forgotten the lantern that my wife had placed between me and granny. In its light I could discern the face of Ramanna. He spoke to me addressing me as ''Master''.

''Who Ramanna? Why did you come back?''

"I forgot my betel leaf case. Your children may have go it and done something with it. I have come to get it."

"Betel leaf case ?" I querried.

Granny, hearing my voice remarked, "What were you doing here all the while?"

"Sitting quietly."

"The betel leaf case is here," and she passed it on to me. "Give it to him. This is the only souvenir of joy he has."

"How did you get it, granny?"

"Your boys brought it here. They were evidentaly playing with it and then left it here...Somehow, my hand came across it and out of curiosity I held it in my hands, when an entire Ramayana unfolded before me......but, first, give it to him. Let him go."

"Did it not contain a tin of lime and one of tobacco?" I enquired.

"They must have been there. If lost, they are gone. But the box is the more important thing."

"In this darkness,who can find them ? If I find them, I will give them tomorrow. For the present, boy, give him some lime, betel, and nut to chew."

"I don't need them, master."

"How much you do talk ! I asked you to return the box to him," scowled granny. I sensed gruffness in her voice and obediently, gave the case to him, which he took in both his hands. "Thank my stars, I got this back," he said, and walked away. On his departure, I asked granny humbly why she was so harsh with me." I wouldn't have kept it for myself. It is a useless thing and if I had lost such a thing, I wouldn't have come back searching for it at all. May be, it contained small tins of silver, but in that case, he would not have gone away without making a fuss."

"What he wanted was the betel leaf case. It was his, and you have given it back. If you find his *chunnam* tin and tobacco box, just return them to him."

"Yes, I will do so, but, you have not answered my question. Why were you angry with me?"

She burst into laughter. "True, true, I lost my temper. I wanted that thing to be returned to him quickly. It was that thing that I had been holding in my hands till then. I was seeing quite a lot of things. Ramanna is a noble soul, an honest fellow. Tell me what happens to this body after the spark of life is extinguished?"

"Why, the body rots, or dries up becoming a mere frame."

"That is what has happened to him. True, he moves about and is called alive by the world but the loss of Nagi was nothing but the loss of his very soul. When she came to him as his bride, she presented him that betel leaf case. Her memories cling to him and so he came running back. Even for a hundred new betel cases he would not part with this old one. He, I am sure, will continue to keep it by his side, even when he goes to sleep."

"Oh, then, this was what you were describing for such a long time. You were talking about the mystery of male and female, a thousand joys and sorrows resulting from it, and a thousand tastes and distastes, etc. Was that because you remembered all this about Ramanna?"

"Did I speak about all those things? Quite true, I perceived all that, but whether I spoke about them or not, I don't know."

"Yes, yes, it was only about that you were muttering. Thinking that you were speaking to some one, I came and sat by you and began to listen to your words. You were unaware of my presence."

''What did you hear?'' she laughingly questioned.

''You spoke about the mystery surrounding the male and the female. Why should that mystery exist? Why should God create the two sexes at all? Why God should push this poor world into such deep illusions, I can never know. That is why learned people say that unless one breaks this illusion, deliverance is impossible.''

''Yes, yes, they say so. Saying so, you will have satisfied the itch of the tongue, but that would never make you wise. What do they mean by illusion? It means that we are not aware of God's purpose. Doesn't it? Can we ever know why He created this illusion at all?

''Impossible—we have entangled even gods like Rama, Krishna, Shiva and Brahma in such an illusion or mystery. At the same time we say, 'It is illusion, we have to break it and without breaking it deliverance is impossible.' I cannot but laugh at such stupidity. What deliverance? Where is deliverance? The so-called saints forsook their wives and children and went in blind faith in search of Narayana and Vitthala. They sang about them endlessly and their devotion to the gods was great. But the fact remains that they abandoned their wives and children. For whose sake did they do all that? They did all that with the desire to meet a Shiva or a Narayana who was no doubt rejoicing with his own wife in Kailasa or Vaikuntha. What can those gods, who have yet to obtain deliverance from their own spouses, bestow on these seekers?

''It is this—which you may term as illusion or dream. It is an illusion to think that a god who himself is deeply attached to his wife, is going to bestow deliverance on you. Why do these gods need wives, if not for love? Without themselves getting married, they could go on creating, preserving and destroying the world. The god presiding over *basari katte* created life; the god presiding over life cooked food and the god presiding over the *budi katte* burned everything to ashes... the different tasks apportioned to three different gods. But to create, to preserve, or destroy, you need the male and the female. Without bringing them together, there is no creation at all. Even people who shout about God won't exist."

The strange sequence of granny's reasoning flabbergasted me and made me realise that when people said she was mentally deranged, they betrayed a narrow way of thinking. However, just for argument, I said, "Granny, you assert that there would be no creation without male and female principles."

"Aa......m........." she drawled.

"A tree like the banyan, or a creeper like the betel leaf yields progeny—if we plant their cuttings and also, in some extremely minute forms of life, I am told there is no sex difference at all."

"Banyan and betel ? Yes, it is so. What is the other thing? I haven't heard of any such thing."

"What I mean is—creation is possible without the coming together of the sexes."

"Through whom does such creation go on then ? Say, through some such agency. The created objects may not be aware of it. Trees and plants are not bothered by such thoughts. They don't go and beg of God, 'Give me this or give me that.' It is only man who does that. If illusion exists, it should be applicable to every life. If it is valid for us and not for a plant, then it can never be '*maya*'."

"What are you leading to? Does God exist, or does He not?"

"Don't you exist? Don't I?"

"We do."

"He exists for our purpose."

"So you believe in God."

"Yes, yes, He exists so long as believers exist. There are stones, trees and such like objects—incapable of believing; they cannot. For them there is neither God, nor the devil."

"But they too should have a God."

"That, only they can say. We don't know what they think. What you and I talk are meant for believers like ourselves is. But note this fact—there is death for believers and unbelievers alike. With birth comes death. Is it not enough if I believe just in the fact that there is death? Accept a fact that you are aware of. Why ask a person like me the question as to why this world was created? You have to ask Him that question. In spite of your asking it, He will not stop creating.

"Instead of that—why should we not acknowledge that the purpose of life is to live and to enjoy the beauty of creation? It is the creation of which He is the author. Live decently for a while, and when the time comes, leave. All other talk seems to be utter nonsense.

"My father never took my permission before he created me. God would not have sought my father's permission before He created him either......"

All this was too much for me. I could trace no line of argument in her talk. This talking at random is a family trait with us. Her own line of thought however was also not quite clear to me. Yet, I could not dismiss her words as nonsense. I felt she did have a fine streak of intelligence, which I was yet to discover. I realised moreover that her own youth or old age had never been silent years. Only, in recent years her earlier silence had made a vivid impression. Her soliloquies do not all seem to be sermons or lectures addressed to me or to others.

I was called for food. Granny had given up food at night. On some nights she would drink a little milk or some sweet *ganjee* made of boiled greengram. Even the single meal she took during the day was meagre. That she should have survived so long with so little food is a wonder.

I finished my dinner and went to bed but I could hardly sleep. Thoughts came crowding and disturbed me. How did so many events come to her mind at the sight of the betel leaf case? How did she sense the arrival of Ramanna by the back door though it was not possible for her to see him or hear him come? Was her sense of smell so sharp? Was it possible to guess a man's character, as she did, merely by touching what he owned, in this instance that betel case? I decided that on some other quiet occasion, when granny was in a cheerful mood, I should ask her all these questions.

As soon as the day dawned, my wife came to me and pointing to two small tins, one containing *chunnam* and the other tobacco, she asked me, ''To whom do they belong?'' I noticed that they were things that my children had pilfered from Ramanna's betel case and told her the gist of my discussion with granny ending with the remark, 'It is all the mischief of our children.'' I then returned those two tins to Ramanna by a special messenger.

CHAPTER III

After I had despatched the tobacco and chunnam tins to Ramanna, my mind began to brood over the tale which granny had unfolded to me the previous night. From Ramanna my mind wandered to his loved one. I tried to bring back to my mind her figure, which a friend had portrayed long ago in his talk with me. I could not however recall the picture. So I created one on the basis of granny's description. But that didn't satisfy me, for, by now she would be a ghost of her former self. Then I tried to imagine a semistarved ghostly female figure which would link with my uncle. His name probably was Seena or Seenappa, granny had said. I didn't remember having gone to his place at any time, or seen him. How could I recall anything about him? Was it not a fact that my father married my mother, after his first wife died? Was my uncle's house situated in Irige village? I remembered one Srinivasa belonging to Kammarapala village, not far from Irige. I had heard that he was a man of multifarious activities. Too many ventures led him to borrow lots of money and then, to pay off the debts he sold his property to his younger brothers and quitted. If it was the same person, he might have migrated from Irige to Kammarapala.

The thought came to me—why not go to Irige and if necessary to Kammarapala to investigate this matter? Irige is not far off. As the crow flies it may be five or six miles away.

Since the land is a jungle area, I may have to walk twice or thrice the distance. But I am no crow to fly and if I do go in the morning, it may be dusk when I return. If I happen to meet someone I know, I may get food, otherwise I may not. When the thought of walking a long distance on an empty stomach dawned on me, somehow it struck me that Janna's grandfather lived in Kammarapala. That sent me straight to his house. Though there are a dozen houses belonging to people of my own caste in my village, I usually don't go to them. I had been to Janna's place only the previous day and he was not at home. But now I wanted to take a chance and so I started, after taking a bath and performing the daily worship. When I had walked about a mile I found Janna seated leaning against a pillar of the verandah. I was happy to find His Highness. He greeted me and said, ''I heard that you were here yesterday. Unfortunately, I was away at my grandmother's house. I had not been there for many days.''

''To your grandmother's house ?''

''Yes, to Kammarapala.''

''Who amongst your grandmother's relatives lives there?''

''My grandfather is still alive, but he does not live there.''

''Where does he live then?''

''Anywhere he likes! What does he care for things or places?''

''Meaning?''

''Oh, it is a long long story, a Mahabaratha, but ultimately a cheerless tale. How much property he had! He lacked nothing. But his stars were bad. From his young age, he developed a fancy for women. Every three days he sought out a new sweetheart. In every place where he had work, he had a mistress. It seems he was a man of expensive tastes.........

Finally a day came when he had to wind up, and sell all he had to his brothers. Now my grandmother lives in a house of one of his brothers. She had two sons and a daughter. The daughter happens to be my mother. Those two brothers are dead and my mother is the only one left. Having lost everything my grandfather had to leave his wife in his brother's house and go away. Later on, he went to a place called Soraba where he started some business and probably gave a headache to all his creditors ; he then left the place. I am told he is now somewhere near Chitradurga running a hotel.''

''Does he not come once in a way to see your grandmother?''

''I doubt whether he even remembers having held her hand during the marriage. Losing all that he possessed, he doesn't have the face to meet his people here. Luckily, his brothers, who paid off all his debts, managed to survive but with great difficulty. Grandmother has managed to live this long. Probably she would have gone away with her husband, if he had come and asked her. This expectation she entertained for a very long time. She pressed her brothers-in-law to search for him. It is they who advised her to forget him. They looked after her and brought up her children. The two sons died. When my own mother was of age, they arranged for her marriage, and sent him word to come and give away his daughter in marriage. He promised to come but never did. That is why my grandmother developed great affection for her only daughter and her grandchildren. She won't come here however much I press her. But you cannot imagine her joy when I go to her. I think she still has a lingering desire to be with her husband. When I went to her last time she said, ''I hear he lives in Chitradurga or Sagar. Please go and talk to him.'' When I went to meet her yesterday, I told her that one of these days, I may find time to go and see him.''

It was agonizing to listen to the story. How much his grandmother had suffered in life! It was hard to reconcile myself to the fact that she was my maternal uncle's wife. Janna continued the tale. He, like me, had not seen that person. ''Is it not strange that he would not come to his own daughter's wedding?''

That man's pretences and airs must have been grandiose. When such a figure collapsed, became insolvent and left his village, Nagi, who heard the news, must have been immensely pleased. Now her sons must have grown up into young men. The only difficulty in carrying out her challenge is that my uncle lives in a distant place. She cannot take her sons and present them to him at all. When such unpleasant thoughts cropped up I tried to dismiss them from my mind.

He then said, ''You are here now. After coming home, I have been really feeling bored. This village is boring. It is true, the hills and plains here are lovely. But a human being needs another human being to converse with. You speak to me and I like to chat only with you. Not that others don't come and talk to me. They do; but they raise so many unwanted topics and one feels like avoiding them. But nowadays you too have become a village dullard; your education has been wasted.''

''I too feel that way.''

''But why should you be like that? You are intelligent, you have brains in your head. If you don't like novels or poetry as I do, just subscribe to a newspaper or two, and read them. Should you not see that the world extends beyond Moodoor''?

I replied facetiously, ''Does that world recognise my existence? If it does not need me, why should I want it? If I feel such a dire need to know about this outside world, I count upon you, a great scholar, to inform me about it. Has that outside world of yours grown longer or rounder than before ?''

He only laughed and then said, ''All your reading and schooling are wasted. Like a villager you utter a mouthful of words. Now, what am I saying? forget it......Tell me now, if you are free.''

''If I had much work, would I have come out to meet you?''

''Then, after our lunch, we shall take a nap and then go for a long walk among the hills or in the forests. How far would the *ghats* be?''

''Just two miles away is Hindgana, there the hill range begins. The *ghat* proper is farther away still. But we may meet someone or the other on the way up. People go there to gather green leaves, and the *Kudbis* go to hunt small animals. There is very little big hunting left. I was told that in earlier days we could always expect to meet *munt–jack*, sambur, mouse deer or a boar.''

''No tiger or the like in our jungles ?''

''For so many years now, we haven't heard of the tiger or the leopard.''

''My mother insists that there are tigers but that they are rare.''

''For that matter, sometime ago, my granny one evening felt a tiger was moving very near our house. Oh ! her eyes and nose are so very sharp. My children made fun of her when she said a tiger had approached. But I am sure she wouldn't have said so, if she had not caught its scent. It wouldn't be a wonder if she 'smelled' a lion in our forests. I am told she has had that gift from her childhood.''

"But I expect she is now a great nuisance. It is extremely difficult to manage persons who are beginning to lose their bearings. If they don't listen to you and persist in their own ways, they become extremely hard to manage."

"We have experienced no difficulty with her at all. She is neither half senile, as you said, nor quite senile as some of our villagers say. She is as sane as any of us here."

"It's so amusing in this village, I mean in Moodoor, there is no difference at all between the so-called sane and the insane. The so-called sane have a a tale about every stone, pond and tree. 'This is the temple that the Pandavas built,' and, 'In this pond Ravana had a swim.' Not one story makes sense. The very idea is funny...... They say in a place very near the *ghat*, Sage Viswamitra performed penance. They show you an ash mound that speaks of the sacrificial fire, and a cavern where the sage sat for penance."

I too, did not believe such stories; nevertheless I said, "There may be a cave; so also an ash mound, though not a sage. Without the ash and cave could such a story have evolved?"

"That is why I want to go on a trip to the foot of the *ghats*. It is enough if we come across some ash and a cave. There is no need to meet a sage. On the other hand, we may even meet a tiger or so. I am bored stiff with sitting at home, and bored with books too."

"Fine! We shall go. Having been born here, and lived here, it would be ludicrous if we are ignorant of local history. A cave is quite a possibility. It is quite possible in the good old days human beings lived here. I am told, in ancient days, this very village was a city. It is likely that early settlers lived in caves carved out with their own hands. No wonder if we find there ash strewn about, for they would have cooked some sort of food. If we are able to see that much, that itself would be an achievement on our part, some great exploration!''

''Then we shall leave immediately after lunch. We should return before dusk so that we don't lose our way. It is better we take a guide who knows the locality. Beyond our village, there is a Kudubi settlement; they know every nook and corner of the forest.''

After lunch we left the place in a hurry. Janna's mother saw him going and stared at him. He said, ''Nothing special, just to kill boredom we are out for a stroll.'' From there we walked towards my house. After walking for about two miles along the narrow forest path, we came to a bit of open ground, where stood the Kudubi settlement. I cupped my hands against my lips and shouted. The sound attracted a Kudubi, Annu Naik. He came out of his hut. I knew him well even though he was not my tenant. I told him the purpose of our visit. He showed a path to the right, and asked us to move on, saying, ''I will join you.'' So we walked on. The forest path was an ascent and we trudged along. By the time we covered half a mile, Annu joined us. He had with him a billhook and a gun. I said, ''The billhook is all right, but why a gun ? Do you expect to shoot tigers?''

''Why not? But more likely, we may meet a sambur or munt-jack and then my gun would indeed be useful.''

''There is no time for shikar. We are looking for a cave or cavern near Nagankalu...........a cave in which some sage did penance!''

''There are a dozen caves at the foot of the *ghats*. But you have to walk a good distance. I went there when I was young.

Walk straight to the east, looking at the tip of your nose and you reach the *ghat* wall. I remember having seen a lot of ash in one cavern too.''

''Then take us there,'' requested Janna.

The foot-worn path vanished all of a sudden. Annu was now chopping and clearing the way straight towards the east and leading us. The nimbleness of his steps, we did not have. We got scratched on the face and the body, as we bent and walked forward. We might have spent almost an hour, moving that way but we had covered very little distance. Then, suddenly, we stood on a mountain ridge. Annu asked us to wait, and climbed a nearby tree. It was a fish-tail palm. From its top he gazed all round and shouted to us, ''Master, not much farther to walk; I know the direction. Oh, there is the *ghat* strip and there, the cavern. Possibly, the ash mound too is there,'' and he climbed down.

He again took the lead, and we followed him. Now it was a steep descent. The ground was all covered with fallen leaves and we had to be cautious and had to hold on to nearby branches of plants when we descended so that we might not slip. A little way down we came across a narrow brook. Water was gushing between boulders, stones and mire. Annu then pointed out to us that the brook had its source at the very point we had come to see. With no further ado he ran towards the place. For us, who were utter strangers to this sort of terrain, it was a hard job. We cautiously climbed up and down every boulder, hesitantly placed our feet on moss-covered stones, and waded through water, which was rather shallow. Compared to our movement, Annu's progress was astounding. He held his gun in one hand and on his waist he slung the bill-hook. He leaped like a monkey and vanished in the bushes.

It took us a lot of effort and time to reach the source of that brook, where he was waiting for us with obvious glee. The place looked like a bog though at places a sand bed was visible. We were reluctant to place our feet on such ground. Feeling it under our feet cautiously, we proceeded. The place was extremely cool and trees nearby had sent their roots, like elephant trunks, to sip the water. It was altogether a different world from the one we had left an hour ago. Annu who stood before us exclaimed, ''We have reached the place, just a little above you can see the site.'' He led us forward where we noted mammoth boulders strewn about the area. Beyond them lay a natural cavern. Quite possibly, at some remote time, it had been a human abode. Crawling acorss those rock boulders, we entered the cave. The floor was even and extended over a wide area. Leaving us there, Annu said, 'I'll return soon,' and vanished from the place.

How foolish of us, to have forgotten to bring with us some food! It would have tasted doubly sweet here. We sat there for a few minutes. Then we walked about the place, and felt its walls at a few places. At our touch dried moss peeled off. On the floor we could see some ash too. In a short while Annu joined us only to say, ''Master, there are three or four similar caves. The time is short but you may just go and see the one that is noted for its ash heap!'' We followed him quickly, walking by the edge of a rock where this cave stood. A short distance away, on a higher level we could see a row of four caverns. After climbing some distance, and walking further, we came across a rock ledge protruding forward. It was full of beehives. Walking further and carefully stepping over a narrow rock ledge, we came to a huge cave. It was four times as big as the one we had seen earlier. It opened out in front, with a sudden drop of about thirty feet. Thus it afforded complete protection from wild animals to people who chose to live there.

In that huge cavern, the floor was strewn with earth and rubble. At one place lay a mound of ash. Since the vault penetrated deep inside, it could have housed a very large group of people. "How could such a large hollow develop?" I questioned myself. Anyway certainly human beings had occupied this place at some remote time, as the thick deposit of ash testified. They had probably lived there for a number of years. Immersed in such reflections I forgot myself and lost track of time. Out of curiosity, I scratched the floor. The ash must have been there for ages because it did not stick to my fingers. So borrowing Annu's billhook, I dug into the floor. To my surprise, it yielded a few bits of charcoal, bone pieces and potsherds. Lifting a bone I said to myself, "Can't this be a human bone?"

Annu stared hard at them. To him they seemed too small. He snatched the billhook from my hand and dug the floor furiously—spreading out larger sods of ash. That brought out a big piece of bone. Identifying it, he said, "This belonged to a *munt-jack*; this is its thigh bone." Of these things I did not know more than he and so I had to accept his verdict. But I asked him to give it to me, which he gladly did.

This had opened a great opportunity for research; a wonderful chance to discover things. I should extract all possible fame from such a chance. What really surprised me was not that bone but a few cowries that were also found. I pocketed them and quietly dug deeper. Then some hard material covered with earth rolled off. It looked like a piece of root, but it seemed too heavy to be one. So I had to refer the matter to Annu, who, weighing it in his palms declared, "It is no root. A root will not be this heavy. This must be a broken antler, probably the antler of a stag or deer."

"Such a small antler!" I said in doubt.

"No, it is a broken bit."

That too I picked up as a memento. Taking up my shawl, I gathered a few more things and made them into a bundle. Just then I became conscious of the time we had spent. It was time to hurry back, I thought. I then thought it was stupid of me to have started for this place at noon instead of in the morning, and not to have brought with us anything to eat. "Had we brought some food, we could have spent an entire night here if necessary." I exclaimed to myself.

"What, spend the night here!" exclaimed Janna.

"Master, we must hurry now; however fast we may walk, it will be dark before you reach home" said Annu.

I was reluctant to move out of that place. The desire to stay longer and see more things overwhelmed me. All this impelled me to say, "It would be no wonder, if, according to our villagers, this area was inhabited by sages performing penance."

Annu seconded by remarks; he said, "Master, it is said sages lived here. This is known as the '*bada bare*'. They say that in the northern *ghat* even today you come across such sages. But they are supposed to be invisible to human eyes." Then he added despondently, "Master, I got nothing from this trip!"

Janna laughingly said to him, "Bringing the gun was fruitless, wasn't it?"

"I do not say so even now, we may need it, if we come across some animal; at least to frighten it."

"Do you expect to meet one ?"

"It is evening already, the time when wild animals move out to graze–a bison or a stag may cross our path. I have seen them often. Samburs and bisons come very near our settlement."

At the mention of sambur and bison, Janna's thoughts suddenly jumped to another wild animal. Thoughtfully he said, "They say that the king cobra is to be found in this region ; I hope it won't turn up."

"You mean *Kalinga*. It is likely to be somewhere in this region. We may come across it too. But first let us move. If we are destined to be killed by it, who can save us ? We never intend to harm it and so we don't expect anything bad from it either. Please hurry ; when we walk fast, the cracking of the shoe will drive away snakes if there are any nearby," Annu said encouragingly. I thrust sundry things into my pocket and carried the rest in a bundle packed in my shawl. Descending from the caves, I dipped that heavy antler–like stuff in the brook, and rubbed it. It was in fact a piece of antler belonging to a deer.

I said, "It looks nice. It will be a memento of this visit of ours. Annu, I really feel impelled to come to this place once again."

"Oh yes, we can come again. Better bring a few more people. Then, we can spend a whole night in that cavern."

"We will do so," said Annu and briskly ascended the hill. We both followed him quickly, but we were panting. On reaching the ridge Annu drew our attention to the setting sun and said, "Now it is all descent and the rest of the way won't be difficult to cover." He cut out for us two long staves, which made the descent easier. When we reached Annu's settlement, darkness had already set in. As we had to step on stones and stubbles, our feet were aching.

We went to Annu's house, and stood there in the yard in front. He said, "Masters, there is a well. Have a nice wash first. Chew some betel leaves. You must be hungry; I will give you a few plantains. I will light two torches and lead you to your place by an easier route."

We washed our faces and feet. We consumed two combs of plantains. Then we drank a pot of water, which we ourselves drew from the well. Since we had satisfied our hunger, I said to Annu, "Annu, you have your food if it is ready."

"There is no hurry, I can do it after I return home."

"Then you can eat at my place and rest there. You too must be dead tired." This remark of mine made him have second thoughts. He dived into the house and partook of what was an apology for a meal; during that time we went on chewing betel leaves. His meal over, Annu announced, "I am ready, masters." Now his younger brother also joined us. Annu led the party with a torch; we two walked behind him; his brother Sidda followed us with a second torch.

"What if some creatures should be crawling about in darkness?" questioned Janna. I could easily infer that my friend was not only tired but also afraid of the journey.

Annu was walking fast, waving the torch as he proceeded. He did not seem to feel tired at all and we were just following him. We emerged from the forest to the corner of the plain and with great relief Janna exclaimed; "No fear now." I remarked, "If you hadn't that much courage, why should you have moved out at all?"

"To see that place. It was a nice-looking place, but nothing much of importance there."

"What great things did you expect to see there which would have made the place seem important?"

"Then you tell me what important things lay there. A cavern between rock-boulders-was it so very important? For that matter, some ash was there. Some one lived there, cooked food and threw away the ash. Is that ash important? It is this ash stuff that makes our people weave tales about sages and so on."

"It is not mere ash there. Ash with black soil had formed firm ground there. Quite a few things were buried there."

"So what?"

"Nothing, nothing, you are a man of fine taste. Only literary balderdash interests you. The fact that in olden days people lived there is of no importance at all to you."

"We exist today, it follows that people must have existed in the past also."

"Thank God, you can see that much! Probably, if some wild boar or a tiger had come your way the trip would have assumed sufficient importance."

"If any animal had come our way Annu was there with his gun ready in his hands."

"It is a native gun; good only to kill a monkey."

"Is that all?"

"Oh, Annu, when this great man came to this place, shouldn't at least a king cobra have honoured him with a visit?" "I said. I was very cross with Janna.

This sarcastic remark stumped him and he said, "Don't talk irrelevantly."

"Are you afraid a cobra will appear the moment it is mentioned?" I asked. Then I felt that I should not have referred to a snake, for he seemed to have a deep fear of that creature.

First we went to Janna's houre ; leaving him there, I turned towards my own. A quarter of the night had passed when we reached my house and my wife was anxiously waiting for me since I had not given her any inkling of my going out at all. On reaching the house Annu said, ''Permit us to return now. But both the torches are burnt out. Let me have some arecanut fronds. We shall tie up two more torches. I'' brought some dried fronds and heaped them before Annu, when my wife remarked, ''Let them also eat and then they can go. I have cooked enough food.''

''How ? Did you expect them ?'' I asked.

''When darkness set in'' my wife said, ''I was very much worried. Then granny came and told me, ''Why worry, he will come by and by.'' I said, ''Alone and in such darkness ?'' but she said, ''No, he won't come alone. Some one is likely to accompany him. So cook a little more rice.''

I was surprised at my granny's foresight. It had indeed served us well. Since Annu could not have had a full meal when he started out in a hurry, I pressed him to stay for food. Both of them said 'No, no,' 'nevertheless they sat down for food and ate well. After food, I gave them betel leaves which they chewed with relish. When I tried to pay them two pieces of silver for all the trouble they had taken, they vehemently refused the money.

I said, ''No, no, you must not refuse. I wish to go there once again and spend a whole day there. I want only you to take me.''

''I am willing to go there ten times. I too may get there some game. That would be payment enough for me. Whoever would want payment for these little things ? Having gone there, did I not locate a number of beehives ? I shall certainly go there again, smoke the bees out, and get a huge pot of honey."

"If you are going there on your own, do tell me; I would like to join you."

"Oh, yes, but master, please don't bring the other gentleman. He is no good for such things. He can't walk, nor can he stand the forest. He has no courage at all. Suppose a wild boar, bison or a king cobra comes up, what would be his fate, if he started running away in fear? How are we to search him out afterwards?"

"You see, though he was born in our village, he grew up in a town. There is not a grain of courage in him. We have seen it now. I am sure next time he won't come even if I invite him."

I sent them away. Granny and my children were fast asleep. As I too was quite tired, I drew up a mat and slept in the verandah. I had expected to get sound sleep, but no, I was awake. The brook, the cave, the huge boulders, the giant trees all passed before my eyes. I entered a cave, passed my palm over its walls and then the feeling came that the cavern was full of people.

That picture slid away. Now I stood in another cave, I was alone. In the chasm before its mouth, I saw a huge striped tiger. He saw me and roared. Since he could not find his way to my cave he was growling furiously. Then somehow, he located the narrow ledge near the cave, and walked towards me. Before me lay a short stick, with a big round stone tied and bound to its end. I hurriedly caught hold of it and when the tiger was about to leap on me, raised the club and struck the tiger on the forehead. The tiger rolled down the cave and fell with a thud. I was afraid; surely he would come after me again! But in a few minutes, he lay dead. I gathered courage; I was hungry too. I could see a heap of tubers on the flour. I struck a flint, held some pith to its sparks, lit some twigs and then raised a fire to roast the tubers. I can never forget the taste of that wonderful dinner!

As I was cramming into my mouth the roasted tubers one by one, I could see a few aboriginals walking towards me from the back of the cave. What ugly shapes they had! There were both men and women among them but none wore a shred of cloth. Their staring eyes made me shudder. I had eaten away the tubers they had perhaps gathered and kept there, and now they would take revenge on me, I thought. My knees were about to give way. They were muttering to each other something and my fear increased. I thought there would be no escape for me and they would surely kill me. But, instead, they approached me one by one and began to kiss my forehead. I was nauseated. Finally their leader came to me. He was a giant of a man and was carrying on his back a newly peeled tiger skin. At his appearance the people who had gathered round me dispersed. I thought I was saved and begged him to protect me. Then in excellent English he said ''Don't worry, they are my people.'' Now I feared that my end had come. I thought that they would make a human sacrifice out of me. The leader who spoke English turned his back to me and I could see blood dripping from the tiger skin on his back. Pointing out the hide to me he remarked, ''I am pleased with this gift of yours. This savage beast has been tormenting us for a very long time. You killed it with just a blow of your fist,'' and he placed a piece of a horn in my hands.

Can you guess what it was? It was the same broken bit of antler that I had picked up in the cave that evening. He said, ''Please hold this. Through it you will gain all my supernatural powers.''

''The sun has raisen, won't you get up?'' Sita's words woke me up. She added, ''Probably you were very tired yesterday; I have never seen you sleeping so long.''

I agreed with her and said, ''I didn't get a wink of sleep the whole night!''

CHAPTER IV

I rolled up my bed, kept it in the room and went for a wash. I was thinking of a cold water bath to drive away the drowsiness which still clung to me. Suddenly I remembered the things that I had brought from the cavern floor. I had no clear idea of the actual materials I had gathered for they were all encrusted with mud and had yet not been washed clean. All the while, I was enjoying the role of a great archaeologist. My first thought was to fetch those things, clean them up and have a fresh look at them. But what a silly thing I had done! I had carelessly taken them to granny's room and kept them in a nook. My collection contained a thigh bone of some animal and it was stupid of me to have kept an old bone in my own house!

I washed all that stuff in a basin of water. First to come to my hands was the piece of antler, which I washed clean; one end of it had been polished flat. On that flat surface I could discern some sort of an engraving; some signs, lines or cyphers were there. I thought of the leader of those aborigines who appeared in my dream and told me that that antler had magic powers. I felt inclined to carry it on my person for a few days, and see what that power could be.

The other things also I washed and cleaned. One was a piece of flint shaped like an axe blade. From the history I had learnt in school, I remembered that the paleolithic man had used such weapons. I identified them as various articles of early man–one, an arrow head, another a scraper, still another something else...... There were a few ground to stick–like shapes. There were sea shells and cowries too, which had holes bored through them. That suggested that strung together they would make a necklace! The last object was the thighbone piece and when I was about to wash it my two children rushed towards me exclaiming, ''Father, what are these!'' I just wanted to drive them away with angry words and hide my treasure from their eyes. When the children persisted in standing and gazing at them, I shouted to my wife: ''Sita, please come and take these naughty urchins away.'' She came immediately and when I saw her looking at what I had with me I remarked, ''These I gathered yesterday at the *ghat* wall and the children are not even allowing me to examine them.''

Her eyes slowly moved towards the bone piece which I had carefully hidden under my foot and she asked, ''What is that you have put your foot on? Is it a piece of bone?''

''You too clear out. You are another child. Piece of bone or whatever it is! I ask you to take away the children and you start an enquiry–what can you understand about these things?'' I said. She was obviously hurt by my rude reply. Calling Kittanna and Chandra she said, ''Come away, boys. He is in a second childhood. He has gathered some playthings and treats them like costly diamonds and rubies brought from Kubera's home.'' Then she took the children away. They went away protesting and grumbling.

I finished that job in a hurry and put all my collection in a small basket, thrust them under the roof and got down to bathe. I poured cold water over my head, over and over again

After the bath, I entered the deity's room and started my daily worship. I chanted the prayers loudly; they were probably heard over quite a distance and diverted my neighbours. Finally, offering the deity its due, I came out of the room. Sita offered me a dish of beaten rice and curds, which I quickly finished. Having stuffed myself with food, I began to think of all the pending household work. Lack of sleep on the previous night had made me forget my normal routine completely. I was feeling quite dull.

"Why not go to Janna's place ?" I thought. He would probaly be limping about, as yesterday's walk had been too much for him. I could make a few jokes at his expense. That made me think of his peculiar tastes and opinions. Though at the sight of the *ghat* wall he showed astonishment when I was digging the floor of that ancient site, he was thoroughly indifferent. Remembering this, I laughed. "No, I will not go to him ; let him come to me. But that he won't do, as he would be resting because of the pain in the legs. He has books ; books of fiction ; in granny's words 'good neither for this world nor for the next.' If children listen to tales from old people, this fellow picks them up from books." I couldn't be idle and I had nothing in particular to do, so I began to pace up and down in the outer verandah. Granny was also there and seeing me, she remarked, "Child, you are still pacing up and down. You haven't moved to the garden."

"Granny, I feel awfully impatient. It is all due to sleeplessness last night. I expected sound sleep after a fatiguing journey but got not a wink of sleep; that's why I am so indolent."

"That often happens, if you are too tired. But where did you go, to return so late? In fact, I did not know that you had returned."

"You mean my trip? I got some wild inspiration. With Janna I walked up to the *ghat* wall at Naganakalu. Having been told that there are caverns there, and that once sages lived there, I wanted to verify what I had heard."

"Yes, yes, my mother also used to tell me that, about sages and caves. Quite likely there are sages. Let them remain there, performing penances. But my feeling is that if you want to meditate you can shut the doors of your house and meditate. I don't see the necessity for your going to the forest for it."

"What granny, can any one do penance amidst the din and bustle of family life...in the midst of wife and children?"

"What do you think I have been doing here all these years? How have the children obstructed me? Look, if you sit down and concentrate on a particular object for a few hours, then sleep overtakes you."

"Is that all ! Do you think that sages who sat in one place like that, slept for years?"

"Not exactly that. But the nature of the human mind is such that, if you repeat to yourself the same thing, your mind begins to wander. Your lips will be muttering some word or words; but your mind sleeps. I don't know what exactly our ancestors did. But I do feel that to meditate on God, going to the forest is unnecessary."

"But granny, here there will always be some one or the other prodding us to speech."

"No, no, even here you can live with your mouth shut. For years I have remained dumb. That was why these people named me Mookajji (dumb granny). I did speak a word or two when it was necessary. I was a woman of few words, but still I earned that name.

"In the forest we may not be talking to men, but would the tigers, bears, birds, insects and the rest keep silent? If here at home you are worried by bed bugs, there in a cave ants are sure to bother you. Their bite would make your skin burn for hours. Do you think those cave dwellers were free from such natural disturbances?"

"Why then did they go to forests at all? Or is it all a big lie?"

"That they did go is perhaps true. Some indeed might have gone. Why did they go? I can't say. I have an idea about it and if I tell you, you may laugh."

"What is it, granny?"

"Have you not seen a millipede? Do you know what happens when we just touch it? It immediately curls up and sleeps. It does so out of fear. It thinks that by feigning sleep, it can avoid danger from outside,"

"What fear did sages have, granny? Would timid souls make a home in caves, where tigers and bears stroll?"

"Retreat to the cave is for that very purpose. They are not afraid of tigers or bears but are afraid of family life. They don't see the primary fact that God, who created them, made them take birth in a family and grow up there. These people are terribly afraid of living within a family. A *Samsara*, a world, involve us in pain as well as pleasure. They don't want the pain. They don't want sorrow; they don't want death but desire eternal bliss! I don't think even the Creator can have such bliss, so long as His creation lasts. So these sages learned the art of running away from one's own people. If they don't want wife and children let them not have them. If they don't want their parents, let them leave them. But is there any way of escaping from these?''

''Is there?''

''Yes, there is one way, that is not to be born at all. Having been born, what should one do? Since one can't re-enter one's mother's womb, one can go in search of a cave, a hiding place and seek safety. If you cannot step forward, you step back. Keeping away from *Samsara*, and the curling up of the millipedes are similar. Where does not *Samsara* exist? Even the forest is a part of it; the tiger is a part of it; the cave is a part, the tubers and roots they eat are its integral parts. Discarding *Samsara* is like discarding one's body. So long as the body is attached to us, we cannot discard it. We can of course talk much about it. Why do the sages, who shun their family and go to live in a forest, eat food? Is it not to preserve their body?''

I was simply astounded by granny's eloquence. When every one belonging to our tradition has been advising us to give up attachment to one's family, granny alone says the opposite. Could it be because she had been deprived of it? Granny's comparison of the cave-seeking sage to a womb-seeking child was startling. ''Granny, forgive me if I am wrong. I have been hesitating to ask you one question.''

''Do ask. If I happen to know the answer I will tell you. There are some who will affirm that what they believe alone is truth; nothing else. I am not so dogmatic.''

''I am told that you were married when you were very young.''

''You see me wearing this red-coloured cloth, I have worn it from my tenth year.''

"In your tenth year this calamity.........!"

"Not even ten. I was given away in marriage at a very young age. They got me a husband. They celebrated the marriage and I went to my husband's house. He too was a child like me. When we were dressed up for the marriage and wore *basiga*, I think both of us enjoyed it all. It was a four-day festival. He never talked to me, nor I to him, though I did spend a few days at his house."

"You are speaking of him in the singular!"

"Oh, if you are particular, I shall speak in the plural. But the fact is, at that time we were ignorant children, he and I. One day he died of fever. My parents rushed to the place and took me back home with them."

"It was only after a period of four years or so, I could understand what had taken place and where my future lay. On the day when I first menstruated, I was stricken with terror. But why my mother wept so much that day I failed to understand at the time."

"What next?"

"Then I grew up; I became an adult. Society felt that the hair on my head was evil. It was removed and I was thenceforth recognised as a widow. But so long as my father and mother lived, I was never starved for affection. That was what made me want to live. Then after the days of my parents, your father and mother bestowed an equal affection on me. They treated me as a human being. I, too, never felt the loss of my husband. When so many children were running about the house, I never felt the desire to have my own children. Children were born; and children passed away. I felt they were mine so long as they lived. Who are you? Who is your wife? Your children? You are all mine. Why should I think that only they who came from my womb are my children and not the others?

"But one thing, my boy, my eyes are still clear. I have seen a few people growing up here. A hundred people have come and gone; still they come and go. A man and a woman living together form a family. They live for a while and then go away. All these make sense to me. I see nothing wrong in it. I don't feel jealous because somebody is happy with his family. I felt no sorrow for losing my husband. Are there not many, who although married don't have children?"

"Well then, having lived all these years as a widow don't you feel weary?"

" That weariness I did not experience when my parents lived. I am told that when I attained puberty, I used to keep muttering to myself. I don't know what I talked or how much. I cannot recall that period. Sometimes even now I talk on and on. But during that period I must have talked too much, and too incoherently and my brother became nervous about it. He must have thought that some devil or some thing evil had taken possession of me. My mother was dead and my father too entertained such fears. They consulted their neighbours and then called a *mantravadi*. He tied a talisman to my neck. One *mantravadi* beat me with a tamarind twig, all the while threatening the devil, 'Leave her and run away or else I will drive a nail into your eyes.' Out of sheer fear of the flogging I shrieked, 'I will go.' He resumed flogging and asked. 'Who are you?" Who am I, you tell me that", I hit back. "Are you not Yajna? The one who died before his thread ceremony?" said he and continued to beat me. Out of fear once again, I agreed that I was Yajna, but at another time I said, "I am Mookambu." He then forced an apology from my mouth, brought a copper pot, played the act of forcing the devil in me into it, ordered the devil not to step into that house again, and went away. Such is the episode of the 'tamarind wizard.'

''My back was full of blisters because of his merciless flogging. I was treated and nursed for my blisters with medicated oil. Somehow I recovered. It slowly dawned on me that my suffering was the result of my soliloquizing. It was clear that it was dangerous for me to talk to anyone thereafter. I decided to keep mum. Let the world not inflict on me the illusions it suffers from. From then on, I was never the first to begin a conversation. I became for all purposes dumb. Till my fortieth year I acted like a dumb woman in a manner befitting the name Mookambika that my parents had given me.

''Do you know when I again began to talk to people? It was after your father's marriage and after you and Narayan were born. When you two would come and roll over me begging me to tell you stories, out of pity for you, I began to speak. It was still later that I began to converse freely with your father and mother. My child, even now I am not inclined to talk to any one by myself. I have indeed gained by it.''

''In what way?''

''Well, I have gained something. You may call it madness and it may be madness too.''

''What may be madness? Talking to oneself? Granny, I feel like tearing to shreds those who call you mad.''

''You just listen to my tale. In a way, speech is essential to a human being. We have to pour out everything that we have in our mind. It makes us feel better. But that was not what I wanted to talk about......''

''What else?''

''Giving up talking resulted in something else. My mind developed a strange faculty. When I go out, or when some one I know comes, or even when I visit a temple or touch something new, a strange sensation comes over me. I begin to experience a sort of vision. The past unfolds itself before my eyes. Even when I am quite awake, strange apparitions move before my eyes. It is just like seeing a play. But I know it is not a dream and it does not occur in sleep. When such a vision rises before my eyes, my tongue begins to speak. Who knows, perhaps that was what used to happen when I was young? I was not aware of what was really happening. But I am now quite aware of talking to myself. It may be that, listening to my mumblings, people thought that a *yakshi* or some such spirit had taken possession of my person. But after that flogging incident, I used to run away and hide from people. I shudder to think of it even now. I hope you won't do what they did to me. If you feel doubtful about my sanity, just call me mad and keep quiet.''

I laughed. Would I ever be so foolish as to get her flogged? ''Oh, so you mumble to yourself, because you happen to see visions, is that so?'' I asked.

''No, not every time. It happens only some times. And sometimes I talk to myself for the mere joy of it.''

''Have you recently exprienced any such visions?'' I asked.

''You said you didn't get sleep''

''No, I didn't; may be because I was too tired.',

''I didn't know you had arrived, because I was sound asleep. Then I woke up; I went out and came back. You were then snoring.''

''Who, I?''

''No, I ! I went out and returned, and then I experienced a strange thrill. Even when I lay down to sleep, I could not. I was seeing sights, hearing sounds. There was confusion all round. I sensed a large concourse of people around me ; not one of them known to me. They were all bare......''

''That is......''

''Just naked. Children, as well as the old ones. The women too. The men were unshaven. They were making a hell of noise—shouting 'beat', 'kill', 'stab', 'bear', 'tiger', etc......this went on till day-break.''

''I too experienced similar nightmares.''

''Similar in what way ?''

''I too saw naked people. They were not hunting but a tiger came and pounced on me. I hit it with a stone mace and killed it. After this a large crowd of nude people surged round me.''

''Is it not surprising that we both dreamed about naked human beings ?''

''Really surprising.''

On learning these things my wonder slowly yielded place to fear. I had kept all the things that I brought from the cave in the room where granny slept. Obviously, it was because of the presence of these things that a sensitive person like granny experienced visions. But I did not have the courage to reveal to her what I surmised. I began to get a suspicion that granny might indeed possess a strange occult power. She must be having some unusual inner power. It was because of this extra-sensory perception that she saw visions not only when she handled strange objects, but also when she was just near them. The visions obviously were related to the objects in some way or the other. If in the evening granny should be in a happy mood, I wished to place some of the objects I brought from the cave in her hands and ask her about them. Did she not say so many things on touching the betel leaf case, that Ramanna had left? Could she do so with other objects as well? But Ramanna was a person known to her and very likely she had information about him from local persons. So she might have surmised about his love affair with Nagi. Even then, those revelations were astounding. There must be some truth in the story that someone coaxed Nagi and made her fall into Seenappa's net, when she had run away from Ramanna and was in hiding.

But there would not be any such living link with the objects that I had gathered in the cave. They belonged to the past. If mere proximity could stir up so many visions of the past in her, holding the objects in the hand would perhaps reveal many more details about their history.

My boredom had disappeared. "Granny, let us continue our conversation in the evening. I want to ask you a lot of questions." I got down from the verandah and came out with numerous thoughts buzzing in my head. Like granny I went to the *aswatha katte* and sat there reflecting. Then a new thought entered my head. About the last cavern I had visited. How could so much of ash collect there? That cave too would have, like other caverns, a natural rocky floor. All that deposit could not be merely ash. It would be a mixture of soil and ash. If that were all ash, then it meant that for years people had been kindling fire there, in which case, the ceiling and walls too would show signs of smoke and soot. That did not however appear to be the case. I surmised therefore that a wall had stood at the mouth of the cave, which had one day collapsed in the rains, contributing to the heavy layer of soil.

I thought that I should go there once again to investigate such a possibility.

This thought relieved my mind to a great extent and my thoughts once again turned to granny. It could not be denied that her life was out of the ordinary. She could look at the world unfettered by traditional values. By herself she would not explain her point of view. She perhaps hesitated to do so for fear of being laughed at and so kept her mouth shut. But this silence had robbed others of the benefit of her views. To me her views on man and woman are of great importance. She believes that the bond between male and female is not merely that which men themselves have created, but something inspired in life by creation itself. That is why she feels pity for Ramanna. She was full of pity for Nagi too. Even when she talked of my uncle she was never harsh. But all these, I confess, are based on my memories some fifteen years old. I was then ignorant about passion and love. So I was tempted to ask her these very questions once again.

At times, I fear my own rambling thoughts. How was it possible for granny to live a life of such seclusion, living as she did in an atmosphere full of passion? Would she have been unswayed by passion when youth filled her life? But how could I ask such questions? Would any one care to reply honestly? But the desire to broach such topics, at least indirectly, persisted.

After lunch, I took a nap, in fact slept well. My thoughts then drifted towards the objects that I had brought from the cave; but as my children were about, I hesitated to take them out for fear of my wife's unwanted remarks. So I walked towards Janna's house. Surprisingly, I met him on the village path half way from his house. He may have started for my house. When he came closer I could see a bandage around his toes. "Hullo, what is this?" I asked.

"Yesterday's boon. Thrice I struck my right great toe against some roots, and now it is swollen."

"Did you get sound sleep yesterday night?"

"Why not?"

"Then you didn't scream in your sleep dreaming of a king cobra?"

"What a cursed tongue you have! Actually I did dream of a huge dark cobra which chased me everywhere, without giving any respite. Then Annu Naik hit its head with a large stick and it died."

"Tell me, when can we go there again?"

"Again! You go; I shall not venture. When is your brother coming from Shimoga? Both of you can then wander in the forest like Rama and Laxmana. If you want, like Rama you can take your wife too. You have your Hanuman in Annu Naik. Surely, that is a brave fellow; he does not have even the slightest fear."

"His house is surrounded by the jungle. His people live and trudge in the forest all their lives. They devise various types of traps to catch animals. What fear can they have?"

"I am not afraid of any creature except the cobra. It is because when I was a boy, I once saw a snake while coming through the fields, and the sight of it struck terror in me. Since then, even a rat-snake makes me tremble."

"It is not a thing to be frightened about. Villagers here are not afraid of it. All these years, only once they have seen it in our village. Some persons who had gone to the forest to chop wood saw it swallowing a ratlle snake. They made short work of it. They said it was very thick and measured four arm lengths. It had white rings all over its body."

"Did it have knotted hair on its hood?" he asked.

"Neither knotted hair nor plaited one! All such silly descriptions come from people who haven't seen a real king cobra. You have one in the Mysore Zoo. It can raise its hood to a height of four feet from the floor. Then it is really a fearful sight." Talking about such things we turned towards our house. There, we could see granny sitting on the *aswatha katte*, as usual. Granny made some enquiries of Janna.

He said, "I came a fortnight ago."

"I will tell you something. You are now of Subraya's age and he is now the father of two children. When are you going to think of your marriage?"

"What is the hurry, granny? I will think of it in course of time."

"By delaying matters you may not lose anything, but that may hurt the girl ..If she were to do some thing..."

"Who is to do some thing?"

"The girl you love..."

"I am not in love with any one."

"You are a liar. Your grandfather ruined his own life and those of a few others. I do not want you to walk in his steps. Don't bluff me! Don't let your eyes fall on three or four girls and lose your sense. It won't do you any good. Some one should be able to trust you and you, her; or else you won't find happiness at all. I want you to live a happy life, and that's why I am telling you all this."

Janna' s face turned pale. He did not utter a single word. The words spoken by granny must have made him furious. "Let us move; let us go for a walk," he said and stood up to go. I accompanied him. I never spoke a word about this on the way, but he touched upon it and said, "That is why people say that your granny is out of her mind. I have been ignoring her all these days because she is old, and has been touched in the brain for a long time. But was it fair of her to tell me such things? Is it her business to teach me what is bad for me?'' He was boiling with pain and anger and I remained perfectly silent. So our evening stroll ended in utter misery.

What really intrigued me was the point that granny had raised. She must have said all that about Janna because she was really aware of his nature as well as his behaviour. So I too felt ill at ease with him. I had taken him to be a straightforward fellow who had hidden nothing from me but now I began to suspect that the rumours about his misbehaviour were true.

After the evening stroll, I took leave of Janna. I would have spent more time with him but I was yearning for a conversation with granny. Soon after I returned home, the call for dinner came. Before leaving for the dining room I remarked to granny, ''There is fine moonlight tonight.''

''Must be. I didn't notice it.''

''Let me have food and come. We shall sit on the *aswatha katte* and talk.''

''The whole of the afternoon you have spent only in talk. You did not attend to any work in the garden at all.''

'' It can wait; also there isn't much work. Today is not a watering day. I want to ask you a lot of questions.'' After this, I hurried to dinner and finished it quickly. Sita observed my haste and remarked, ''I prepared that dish of mango and cucumber with so much care. Why this hurry ?'' I did not reply but came away. I went to the pendal, reached for the curios I had hidden there, and went to granny.

"We shall go," I said.

She was good enough to get up and move. Most of the day she spends in that place, but rarely does she go there at night.

On reaching the *katte* I said at once, "Granny, please open your palms and take this. This I got from there; 'there' means where I went yesterday." She took it in her hands and sat quiet. For sometime she did not utter a single word. I could see her feeling that piece over and over again.

"What is this, my child?"

"You must guess; I really don't know."

"Did you keep this thing yesterday in my room?"

"Yes."

"Then it is no wonder I saw so many queer things."

"What were they?"

"You see, I cannot make out any thing. This is unlike anything that I have seen so far. Who might this be? Must be a person of importance; of great importance too. He wears no clothes. A tiger skin hangs from his back. He is clutching this bone in his fist. He looks like the chief of a hundred people. Yesterday night I saw similar people, all naked. You see, the man who holds this piece of bone might have killed a boar, a bison, a deer and such animals. No wonder."

"These would have been his food."

"It looks as if holding this, he used to perform magical rites and the like. Oh, look there, some miserable woman is approaching him with a sickly baby. She falls at his feet and seeks his help. The child's body is covered with red blisters. Its body is boiling with fever. I think it won't survive. He remarks, "The gods are angry. 'You offer me this child' says the god." Who is this god? What deity? Is it the mother goddess? See, there, he is drawing some picture on the floor. It looks like the figure of a female; I am not very clear as to its sex. But it has tusks and horns too!

''Ah, now I know; he is the priest of that deity. He is becoming possessed by it. Oh, what rage! What voice! 'This sickness will pass away' he says. He is pointing his wand towards the figure, chanting something and waving the wand over the child. Now the woman looks more cheerful.

''Oh, now there is some new festival; but the priest is the same. He has a large number of followers. Those men are dancing with sticks and swords in their hands. Having drawn the figure of a tiger on the floor they are squatting around it. But why? Where are they going? It is dark all round. Does anyone go out for a tiger hunt in darkness? See them marching towards a huge hollow. Why are they raising a huge fire there? Ah, raising smoke and a lot of it. Look, the tiger is leaping out of the smoke. See, it pounces upon a child and escapes......Well done! They have killed it now. It has made a victim of that child and these people have settled accounts. Tit for tat.

''Well, this looks awfully bad!'' Granny sat mute for a little while. Then she remarked, ''Can such things happen?''

''What do you see, granny?''

''You see, she is yet a girl in her teens and he is a middle-aged man of about forty or fifty. He is a necessary part of all their rituals and festivals. Like children observing a dog mounting a bitch, these people—men and women-are witnessing that awful sight. She is a female and he a male. What is there now to watch?

''What madness! Is darkness needed for dogs to copulate? Is it because of the shyness? God would not have made them shy at all. Ah......they are taking her away, decorating her like a bride! People are dispersing. Where is that bridegroom going? He must have a home; not a home but a cavern. His wives and children are waiting to receive him there—so this is his ninth wife.

"Child, I have been describing to you scenes that I witnessed. But I hesitate to accept them as real. For such a custom or rite may not prevail anywhere in the world."

"What custom?"

"Didn't I just now describe it? A man mounting a woman before a hundred pairs of eyes. Probably what strikes us as indecent does not appear so to them. Who knows?" sighed granny. Then she held the antler towards me.

"What is this made of?" I asked.

"It is perhaps a deer horn. Anyway it feels so to the touch. But when one thinks of the man who carried it......well, stop it; enough for the day. I feel quite tired too, and my body shivers." She placed the antler bit on the floor and asked me to take it away. So I did.

"Keep it far away. Don't bring it into the house. If you do so, I may not get any sleep at all."

I was then in a predicament. Where to keep it then? I walked a short distance, hid it under a bush, covered it up with some earth and returned. "It is getting late to go to bed", I said and we both went home. When we reached home, both my children were asleep and my wife expressed her displeasure by remarking, "What great business did you have with granny today? You were gossiping so long with her?"

"Yes, gossiping," I repeated and leaving the sentence incomplete, I spread my bed in the verandah and stretched myself on it.

CHAPTER V

In the morning my mind again turned towards the stones, bones and shells I had collected. I then remembered the piece of antler I had hidden the previous night. I thought of putting them somewhere in a safe place, so that I could take them out one by one and submit them to granny's scrutiny, waiting leisurely for her mood. But doubts cropped up in my mind about her ability to see the past. Yet, what she had seen while holding the antler-piece seemed too graphic to be dismissed as unreal. But could I take it as true? Previously she had made some observations about Janna to his very face. Could I take them also as true? Knowing him intimately I found it hard to accept them.

So my mind whirled in doubt. Just then remembering that it was the day for watering the coconut palms, I went to the garden at the back of my house. Already a labourer had come and was lifting water with the picota. Admonishing him for not calling me, I began to let the water to different rows of trees. After a few hours of that work, the disturbing thoughts left me. Then my elder son Kittanna came running to me and said, "Uncle has come"

"Which uncle?" I asked.

He slyly repeated my words and said, " If I say uncle, you ask 'which uncle?' "

I understood my foolishness, as the boy has only one uncle and that is my younger brother Narayana. He ought to have come home from Shimoga at the commencement of summer holidays. Narayana's arrival was no great news; no special welcome was needed and so I continued watering the plants.

"Daddy!" exclaimed my child.

"What?"

" I told you that uncle has come. Mofher wants you there." Then I thought that along with him some one else must have come. So I asked him, "Has your uncle come alone or...?"

"There is some one else, too."

"Well, then I'll come quickly."

I washed my hands and instructed my helper that only one more row of palms needed watering.

"You go, master; I can look after it," he said.

By the time I adjusted my clothes and reached the well, my brother was advancing smilingly towards me. There was a young man of his age with him. He saluted me and I returned the greeting. I asked, "Have you been here for some time, Narayana? My son reported to me your arrival." All along I had neglected the presence of Kittanna and he was pulling his uncle's clothes to draw my attention. My brother lifted him up and coddled him, and I remarked, "Why lift him; he is no baby." Narayana just laughed.

Before I asked him a second question my brother introduced his friend saying, "Let me tell you who this is. He belongs to our district; in fact to the same taluk as ours. We are both teachers in the same school. His name is Anantharaya. His ancestors left our district long ago and settled in Shimoga. They are running a hotel there. Their business is prospering. My friend was born and bred there and has no ties whatever in our district. He says that in Haglur he has some distant relatives."

"Is he intending to go there?"

"No, no, he came with me just to stay with us. You see Anantu, my brother is so keen on driving you away!"

I laughed at my own inadvertent remark.

"Excuse me, Anantharaya," I said. "Some times we talk thoughtlessly not realizing the implications of the words that escape from our lips. Narayan, did Sita give you coffee; or has she yet to do so?"

"It is nearly an hour since we arrived. We have finished everything. It is only after quenching our thirst and hunger we moved on to meet you," said Anantharaya.

"I am so happy to have you in our home. People rarely come to this nook."

Anantharaya then burst out in praise of our village. "This is a wonderful place; the tediousness of the journey is the only discouragement. Do you know how far Haglur is? It is the birthplace of my father and grandfather," he said.

"Do you want to go there now? Who lives there?"

"Not necessarily today. We may go by and by. No one I know lives there. My father lived there when he was young and then he left the place, he has only visited it just once or twice after that. But he remembers it very well. He says, it is extermely beautiful. That is why I want to see it."

"That is all right. We shall go there at leisure one day," I said and led them to the verandah where we all sat down. Just then I saw granny getting down into the courtyard. My brother pointed her out to Anantharaya and said, "She is my grandmother. She is seventy or eighty now. A queer person;

given to few words. Most of her talk is addressed to herself. She is not free even with me... a little bit crazy; she has been so from her childhood."

I flared up in anger at the words. "A bit crazy—that is what you are, not she." I know he had always thought that granny was touched in the brain. But, was it right to speak like that before strangers, in our own home? Wouldn't it have sufficed if he had said, 'That is our granny'?

Probably Narayana felt the sharpness of my tongue and so pleaded, "Forget it please. I talked just to be provocative. Why take it so seriously?" We dropped the subject and fell to talking on sundry matters. In the midst of it Narayana questioned, "Brother, has not your friend Janardhan turned up for the holidays?"

"It is his arrival that reminded me about the holidays. Or else, in this village, February and April are no different. When he comes home he often visits us. Yesterday we both went for an evening stroll. Mr. Anantharaya, Janardhana is a teacher like you, " I said.

Anantharaya quipped "No, no, we are only high school teachers but he is a college lecturer."

"I spoke about him because it is said his grand-father's house also is somewhere near Haglur. In olden times there was some alliance between our family and theirs. If you are to go there better make inquiries of him."

"Oh, this is such a simple matter ; there is no need for help from Janardhan. We shall go there on our own. We need not stay there for food. I want to go there because it happens to be my father's native place, that is all."

There was nothing more to talk about and I began to think about something to interest them. Their arrival sharpened my desire to visit Nagankalu mountain wall and see the caves once again. My brother too would like to wander about, but he is no good at trudging long distances. I thought of showing him my curios and then whet his appetite. So I brought a few of them from the hiding place, held them before him and said, ''This seems to be quartzite; this—some dark piece of rock. But they seem to have been cut to a specific shape.''

''What do you think they were used for?''

''To drive away crowsor monkeys,'' remarked my eccentric brother.

''For that so much chiselling would not have been necessary,'' remarked Anantha. Thinking hard, he said, ''They look like early stone implements. I get the idea from illustrations in books I have seen. This is perhaps the blade of a lance; this looks like an axe-blade. If so, the finds are important. They might be centuries old.''

''I have brought them home without thinking about them much. These probably provide proof that people have lived in our Moodoor for a very very long time.''

My brother always raises a controversy. He said, ''Does that need any evidence ? That we are here today is proof enough of the existence of people in the past.''

''But that would not prove that our ancestors and their remote ancestors had lived here at this place from early times. My father migrated to Shimoga from here, similarly others might have come here from different places. None can establish that the ancestors of people who live here now must have all along lived in this region alone.'' argued Anantharaya.

Seeing Anantharaya take my side in argument my brother cracked a joke, ''Wonderful man ! Till you came here you were my man. The moment you stepped in here, you saw that my brother was the master of this household and you have jumped over to his side!"

He said, "Honour elders first ; the turn of the younger one comes later."

In this way we chatted about so many topics. It was only when I heard Sita's voice saying, "Are you all observing a fast today?" that I realised that I had spent much time in gossip. Being hungry the children had already established themselves in the kitchen. Kittanna came out quickly, approached his uncle and muttered in his ears, "There is *payasa* today!"

I rushed to the well to have a bath. Then I ran to the deity's room to finish the rituals of worship and meditation in one sharp sweep. Sita brought in quite a few things as offerings to the deity. The smell of cardamum distracted me from my meditation. I praised Sita within myself for having prepared so many dishes so quickly. Now I could guess why my children had set up their camp in the kitchen itself. In order not to tire out their patience, I quickly made the offerings before the deity, sounded the bell, waved *Arati* and came out having completed the worship.

When leaves were laid for meals, my two children sat on either side of my brother. Anantha and I sat facing them and granny sat at a short distance from us. Before commencing to eat she wanted talk to her grandson and said, "Oh, *mani*. (child) Shimoga seems to agree with you very well."

"Why not? Are there no human beings there?" replied my brother rather curtly.

She then commenced eating and my wife served the preparations one after the other. Just then my son Kittanna said, 'If mother prepares *payasa*, it tastes excellent sweet, extremely tasty. Why does she not prepare it daily?"

With the meal over, and particularly because I felt rather heavy after the sweet dishes, I spread a mat. I spread two more mats, and placed pillows at the end of each. I lay down and requested the guests also to lie down and rest.

"I must have a good nap," Anantharaya said as he stretched himself on the mat. He need not have hestitated to follow the master of the house. I was expecting my children to stop their talk, which would otherwise allow us no rest; by then my wife coaxed them to silence, promising them *payasa* in the night also.

When the children were asleep, I closed my eyes and slept. Others must have followed suit. But on waking up I found myself alone, and enquired of my wife where the others had gone.

"Narayana must have gone to Janardhan's house, with his friend and the children. Indeed, he loves the two children very much" said Sita.

"What do you mean? Do you say that he loves the children more then I love them?" said I sullenly.

If it were any other time, Sita would have shot back a reply, for it was never her habit to miss a repartee. But she came near me, peeped into granny's room and not finding her there, asked me if she might bring the betel leaf plate. She brought it to me and sat by my side. I guessed that there was something she wanted from me.

"What do you want?" I asked her.

"Oh, like a god who blesses, you want me to beg. I want nothing. I came to give information about your brother."

"Well then, come out with it, whatever it is; whether it is about him or about yourself," I drawled.

I then learned that before my brother left the house he had passed on to her some important news. These three years, in order to justify my place as an elder of the house, I had gathered ever so many horoscopes, and had worried myself about Narayana's marriage. He, out of vanity, had put them aside with the remark, "If I want to marry, I shall inform you myself." My village friends have begun to complain that I have neglected my responsibility and have allowed him to grow like a stud bull. The news that Sita gave me brought great relief. This guest of ours, Anantharaya, it seems, has two sisters of marriageable age. His people have made sure the horoscope of the girl and that of Narayana agree. Narayana, it seems, has taken a fancy for the younger sister. Giving all these details, Sita ended with the words, "So, that is it. We have only to go to Shimoga as the bridegroom's party and return home with the bride. Choice of ornaments will all be settled as we want them."

"Finally he has made up his mind," she said with a sigh of relief.

"It is he who has to marry. Looking at Anantharaya we can make a rough guess how the girl looks. If he agrees, the matter is over," I said.

"Their worry is not that," remarked Sita.

"Their? who are you talking about?"

"Parents of the girl. She has an elder sister ; if the younger sister gets married first, people may begin to say that something is wrong with the elder one. That is their fear. They have tried hard but haven't found a suitable alliance. It is for this purpose that they want you to put in a word to Janardhan."

"To Janardhan ! He is of my age."

"Is that too old?"

"That's not it. All these days I could not tell Narayan to get married. Do you think I can order Janardhan to do so now?"

"It seems his mother is pressing him too."

"Yes, that is all true. I too may tell him about it. But I don't think on this question my words will carry weight. We will give our consent to Narayana's marriage. And there is no point in advising some one else, when we are absolutely ignorant about the people who seek the alliance."

"They are people of Haglur, it seems!"

"What of that?"

"There is something else. There is a purpose in Anantharaya's visit to this place. It seems, before coming home, your Janardhana had called at their house, in Shimoga. He has seen the girl and told them it seems, that he would write to them after returning home. But he hasn't written at all. So to make sure....

"So, that is the story. That is why they went there."

"May be, perhaps also to know whether he or his mother had any conditions in mind."

"All that should come from them. You see, just yesterday, this very topic came before granny. She curtly advised him not to put any girl to unnecessary embarrassment. That was an oblique reference. We shall mind only our business. Even if we do not consent, if Narayana has made his choice, he is going to have her. But before we give our formal consent, better seek granny's advice."

"Ask her?"

"Certainly, she is our only elder."

''That is true. But one can never know what she may say. Suppose she gives a negative reply ?''

''Then tell him that we have no objection but let him seek her blessings first.''

''Yes, then you please coax granny beforehand. Request her to give her blessings to this alliance. I am rather afraid of her tongue. Please talk to her before they return home. Please find out her opinion.''

To me it was a matter of duty ; a matter of grave responsibility. I was more anxious about it than Sita. So I started to meet her when I remembered about those stone bits and sea shells. Picking them up I walked towards the peepul tree. Keeping away the piece of cloth in which I held the objects, I approached her and asked, ''Granny, when did you come here ?''

''Almost half an hour ago. Your brother and his friend went that way, and I came this way. Just when I moved out, a lizard fell on my right shoulder. I considered it a good omen. Who is that person who came with Narayan ?''

''A friend of his. It seems his ancestors were residents of Haglur. Now they have a hotel in Shimoga. The person who has come here is a teacher, like Narayana ; teaching in the same town.''

''Where did they go ?''

''Sita told me they went to Janna's place.''

''Let them ; they go in vain. Their work will be only half done. They won't succeed completely. You need not worry any further. Your responsibility is lessened. The boy and the girl make a fine pair. The sooner the marriage takes place, the better. So, you will be without the burden that your father left on your shoulders.''

"I came to ask you about the same subject, but hesitantly. I don't know those people."

"I too, do not know those people. I observed him as he came, and from the moment I saw him I have been having joyous sensations. I am unusually happy today. Probably it is because of the purpose of his visit."

"You said half their work will be done."

"That boy came here to shoot two birds with one stone. But the other chap........."

"Janna?"

"Not a trustworthy fellow. Yesterday I told you something about him. I spoke out what I felt. Even if he consents to this marriage it is not advisable. He may argee to the proposal as he wants money. But the girl who accepts his hand is not likely to be happy. If she is an amazon who can tame him, that is a different matter."

"They have two girls to be married; both are educated. They have gone for talks about the first girl's marriage."

"Both the grils are good ones; the elder as well as the younger."

"You think so?"

"The elder one is not so beautiful, but she is the better girl. But your brother has fallen for the younger one. It is all right."

"You seem to have overheard my conversation with Sita."

"Have you consulted her? What does she say?"

"Would I go against your wish? Or would she?"

She smiled.

"Granny, I have not yet finished with those things that I brought from the cave. I have brought a few more. Shall I show them to you?"

Lending Library

"What is this madness ? All right, bring them if you want. I'll tell you only if I sense something, otherwise no."

Then I placed a blade-like stone in her palms. She closed her eyes and began to concentrate.

"This, my child, belonged to hunters like Rama and Laxmana. I can see someone standing with a bow and arrows. He is a good sportsman. He is a flesh-eater but not a digambara."

"You mean ?"

"Yesterday I told you about naked humans. This person wears a sort of loin cloth ; a cloak hangs from his waist."

"And further......"

"He has a brother and a sister-in-law. Probably that was why my tongue uttered the name of Rama and Laxmana. But I wonder, how can these people live without agriculture of some sort ? This fellow too is a cave-dweller. He is no sage, just an ordinary person like you and me."

"In olden days many people lived such a life ; and in many places."

"I can make nothing more out of this," she said. Then I took back the stone blade, and gave her in its place another small piece of stone.

"The possessor of this is a stronger personality than the one I just now saw. He has the same figure. This, my boy, is like an axe blade. Of what use is a stone axe ? Is it to chop wood ? Yes, I can see someone chopping wood with it. chopping a piece of flesh too......."

"Granny, before the discovery of metals people used to fashion axe, knife, scraper etc., out of stone."

"Difficult times !"

"Surely."

"But this person is a brave man ; all the others are afraid of him. With this in hand he has been able to kidnap a woman from somewhere. When her people came to attack him, he drove them away.

"But he respected his wife and loved her very much. She belonged to a totally different clan and place. Well, a woman is destined to be that. She is a thing to be born somewhere, and destined to live somewhere else, with someone."

"Have they any children ?"

"They have. I can see six of them. Two seem to be dead, and about two others, I con't be certain. Many other faces seem to come before theirs."

"One more stone, granny."

When she said 'Yes', I placed a round stone in her palm. It was the size of a fist, and looked like a river pebble. Though it appeared to be an ordinary one because I found it in that cave, I wanted to test it, in her hands. Besides this, I had a few pieces of bone which I reserved for another occasion. Giving the stone to her, I remarked, "Granny, this is smooth and rounded. No bits are broken off from it."

"You say it is different from the rest."

"Even the others were not simple things. It must have cost a good deal of effort to give them their shapes......but this one is different......" Before she had finished the sentence her whole body began to shiver. She held the stone tightly in her fist for some time, silent and her eyes shut. I was afraid some one might come that way and see granny in this queer state.

"Oh, Lord !" she said, breathing heavily.

"What do you see ?"

"I see so many things."

"Describe them in the order in which they appear, granny."

"This is a phallus, my child."

"Linga, you mean? Siva stone?"

"A phallus is just a phallus. No Siva or any one else. This would not have been there all by itself. There should have been something besides. I can see a dark cave before me and behind it stands a smaller cave. In that small cave this stone was kept on a hollowed out slab."

"A *panipitha* or pedestal, you mean?"

"Not necessarily. Probably you are carried away by their resemblance to a pestle and mortar. This, you see, is a symbol of the male principle. In fact, a penis. What was left in the smaller cave would be its counterpart, a vagina-like piece. people used to worship these two objects together."

"As Siva?"

"Nothing of the sort. As phallus and vagina, pure and simple. I feel like laughing. But no-on second thoughts it seems to me there is nothing to laugh at. Creation became possible with male and female principles. Human beings thought God created all things in the same fashion. Birds and animals are all born in the same way. Whenever I went to any Siva temple, at the sight of the linga and its pedestal surprise used to seize me, and I never felt inclined to salute those symbols. When I visit temples what I feel is not devotion but utter wonder. I have never felt like begging God to give me this and that. Begging seems to me the most foolish thing to do. Extending your palms for some thing before one who created water, air, fire, the earth and the sky, in fact one who gave us life itself, betrays total lack of intelligence. Suppose the creator Brahma hits back saying, 'What did you do with the things I have already given?' what would you say?"

Her philosophy was beyond me and so I said "Granny ... How did they worship this? Did they bathe it? Did they offer flowers and fruits as we do now...?"

"That I didn't think of. Probably I would have got at it, had I intensely thought of it," She thought for a while and burst out laughing.

"Why the laughter?"

"My guess was right. What I saw earlier was right."

"What was it?"

"I told you it was a phallus, and left behind in the cave is its counterpart. Quite a number of people are gathered round it. In a way, the whole scene is obscene. Of course, there are no children around. Young men and women are copulating there. For a while it looked obscene. That is because of a false sense of values. These people are playing the game, which God had desired them to play here. In a sense, I can read a sort of reverence for the thing they are doing. These people are not begging God to give them anything, unlike the priest I came across the other day. The one, I mean, who wanted to drive away the baby's illness. When for the first time I held that antler piece in my hand I had a strange feeling. That was why I asked you to keep it away. But when I hold this object, I feel no hestitation or shyness. Others may feel so. But why should I? To be born is no ugly thing; to live is not ugly; death too, is not ugly. Should creation alone be deemed ugly ?

"How can the spirit that unites man and woman for good or bad, sorrow or joy, seem dirty?"

Just then I saw some one coming towards our house. I took back the stone from her and said, "You stay here. I shall keep it at home and come back." I bear. After leaving the objects in a secret corner, I went to Sita, and reported the result of my discussions with granny. She, on the whole, was pleased but still murmured, "Why should granny think of only untoward events!"

"What are you referring to?" I asked.

"The reference to Janardhan."

"She said nothing very critical about him. Even if she did, we are not the ones to correct her. Granny's ways are her own."

"Yes, yes," she said and went away.

I saw a stranger coming towards our house. He might have been the person I saw at a distance from the *aswatha katte*. As he stepped in, his voice resounded, "Is the elder of the house in?" The voice seemed familiar. When I looked at his face, I could easily recognise him and said, "Oh, it is you! When did you come from Bangalore? What news?"

"I don't live in Bangalore now, but in Mysore."

"Ah yes; my memory is not what it should be. What brings you here? When did you come? To day my brother also came from Shimoga. Now he has gone to Janna's place with a friend of his. Tell me, are you doing well with your hotel?"

"Yes, tolerably well. It is just a small affair with limited business. I have to come home at least once a year to gather land rental or else I lose it."

"Did you come just for that purpose? Surely, your travel expenses will eat up these collections."

"But yet, if I can get the rentals, I can spend them on the temple service. I have to pay my respects to *Amma* once a year."

"Who lives in your house here?"

"None at all. I have kept a relation of mine there. Till last year, my mother used to live there. But I did not want her to live a lonely existence here."

"So you have severed all ties with Moodoor?"

"How can I? It is because of Goddess Hinduganamma that I am still living. She is my protector. My grandmother used to call her Kotalamma. In her honour I have named my hotel, 'Jagadamba Vilas.' Is she not the mother of the world?"

"That is fine. The other day when I returned from a stroll through the forest, I passed by your house. The temple door was open. Somebody had put an arecanut flower on the head of the image. So, worship still goes on there. But what about the roof of the sanctum? It seemed that may collapse any moment!"

"This time, before I return, I'll see it gets a straw thatch. In a year or two I want to put up a tiled roof. I am sure she will get this done through me. She has saved me from a hundred calamities so far." As he was thus narrating his affairs, Sita came and joined us. She asked him, "Have you been to see Janna?"

"No, not yet. He may talk to me here, but never cares to do so at Mysore. There I am too small a man to catch his eye. He is in a different world. Still I get reports about him from someone or the other... You see, you are people close to him. You should give him some advice.... but please don't mention my name."

"What do you mean?"

"It is what I learned from others. It would have been nice if he had married early. I hear he has been chasing girls. He did catch the eye of the right sort of people in this matter. I myself know it for certain. He has been taken to see at least twenty girls of marriagable age.''

''Not a single girl approved?''

''The point is this: I say it from an oblique reference he made to some others. He told them that he was not a cheap commodity. Probably he is after some one who can offer a dowry of twenty or thirty thousand! He would have got that much, too. There is one among our hotel fellows, who has an educated daughter, a fine girl too. She has reached the age of marriage and her father was in a hurry to find an alliance. He broached the subject with Janna, and Janna began to go to their place often. But somehow they began to doubt the motive of this man's visits. They told him point blank to stop such flirtation! I wish he had taken a girl in a right royal way, instead of engaging in such demeaning behaviour. I am ashamed when people ask me, 'Isn't Janardhana from your native place?' ''

I slipped away from the place. I have no doubts about the integrity or sincerity of Manjunath of Hindugana. This news made worse my already sore feelings. When Manjunath saw me leaving, he said to Sita, ''Probably your husband is bored with my talk. I gave him all those details for the simple reason that he and Janna are close friends. If there is anyone on earth who is in a position to advise Janardhana, it is your husband.'' Sita too was probably surprised at his words. Manjunath is a distant relation of hers. We have known him from his younger days. He never fails to call on us whenever he visits his native place. Hearing so much from him, I was almost stunned to silence.

''I am going to the garden,'' I said to both of them and left the place. I could find no other way of escaping from my mental agitation.

CHAPTER VI

In the very last year of my study for the Bachelor of Arts Degree, just when there was only a fortnight left for my examinations, my father notified me that I was to be married. He didn't do it in so many words, but asked me to "come home quickly." When I reached home, he told me that my horoscope and that of Sita agreed very well and so I had to marry her. I evasively told him, 'Let the examinations be over.' He would not accept that excuse. Instead he argued "Your examinations and tests are conducted every year or once in two years, whereas marriage is an examination that you take once in a lifetime." He straightaway fixed the date of the marriage. Even an educated fellow sees the face of the girl, who is to be his wife, for the first time, in the marriage pandal. So I was married in a great hurry. Even then, that year I sat for my examination and passed it without difficulty. But after that, I became immune to the various subjects that I had studied. If I developed some little interest in history, it was only after I left the college. It was all due to my wanderings in the hills and forests of Moodoor, seeing the temple ruins, discovering the curves of vanished streets and foundations of ruined buildings, when finally I got the idea that at one time my Moodoor had been a great city.

I am not particularly fond of cities and am quite content with my village. But by raising that village to the status of a capital, I was giving a boost to my vanity. When I was in such a state of mind, my trip to Naganakalu, the acquisition of the Stone-Age implements, and the inferences that granny drew from them, induced in me a craze for archaeological research. I was determined to push back the history of Moodoor by thousands of years and place it on a par with ancient cities like Memphis, Luxer and Thebes. I wanted to go out once again to the Western *Ghats* with Annu Naik. I would not let Narayana and his marriage come in the way.

Narayana was in a hurry to get married. He was four years my junior. His hurry was natural. He wanted me to run to Shimoga and fix up things with his would-be father-in-law. Though I was the elder of our house, I was totally ignorant of the complicated formalities of a marriage ceremony. I knew full well that the major requirements were a boy and a girl; for the rest I had to gather the necessary information from my neighbours. I told him, "If you feel satisfied we are also satisfied. Moreover, granny has blessed this proposal. What more do you want? You go and settle everything yourself. I feel reluctant to leave my seat here, once I have got accustomed to it. I feel that, after the question of the marriage is settled, the two parties should be in a mood to arrange everything in a co-operative spirit. I am not one of those who feel that the joys and sorrows of the boy are different from those of the girl. Matters being what they are, where is the need for me to go? You may as well go and settle all these matters."

But, Sita taking Narayana's side said, "Why then should you be the elder of the house?"

"Even that role he can take on himself," said I.

"Does it mean that you are going to marry a second time?" It was clear that Sita was very clever.

"All right, lady, I shall obey your commands."

"What ornaments have to be ordered? What will they get done? How much shall we have to get done—that is one point. The other is—about the time of the marriage. Narayan's fancy is for the younger one. The elder one, it seems, is too old for him. In that case should this marriage wait till the elder girl is married? This is a more important question."

"But...what about yesterday's mission to Janardhan?"

"These people went and had a talk with him. It seems Janna threw the burden on his father. Anantharaya took courage to broach the topic with his father too. His father was reluctant to play any part in the affair; it seems he said, 'Don't talk about any thing to me. The young men of the modern generation will never listen to us. If Janna had listened, he would have been married six years ago. Till he himself asks me to arrange his marriage, I won't take any step in this matter.'

"Now their idea is to approach him through you. They returned home at dusk. Narayana gave me all those details. I advised him, 'You can give an assurance so far as you are concerned. We shall have nothing to do with matters connected with Janardhan. So many tales are told about him, none of them makes pleasant hearing. Better to drop that idea.

"So matters have reached this stage. Anantharaya feels that if he were to insist on both alliances, both may break. But if he approaches you and requests you to settle Narayana's affair, do not put it off. Narayana is insisting on having his marriage performed this year."

"This year! This is the month of Vaisak."

"Why not? Next comes Asada; that is monsoon. Better this month itself. Out of the thirty days of the month, four are already gone. We have to go to Shimoga, settle all matters, get the jewels made, arrange for the marriage. Will the remaining days not suffice ?''

In this marriage, Sita was as eager to shine in the bridegroom's party, as Narayan was eager to get married. I had no such hurry. Such earnestness and haste on their part were a nuisance to me, as they would certainly come in the way of my discussions with granny about the relics. I was interested in further discoveries in the cave, and publishing my findings about them and seeing things in print. But matters here were settled ex-parte. I was to go to Shimoga in the next two days and attend to all formalities connected with Narayana's marriage. I thought of delaying things by a day-by inducing him to visit Haglur, but that was not to be. Narayana saw to it that his friend went a day earlier to Shimoga in order to prepare his people to meet me the next day there.

Our village lies very near the *Ghat wall*, and we usually have some heavy showers before the commencement of the actual monsoon. So, I could not lose track of time. Jewellery was a must and there was no question of getting the jewels made in the village, as we have not even a blacksmith, let alone a goldsmith. I would have to go to Coondapoor and buy the ornaments from a jewellery shop. If they said it was gold, I had to accept it as such. So with the purchase of clothes. This would need two days and I decided to make the purchases after my return from Shimoga.

Since my brother accompanied Anantha to the bus terminus, I thought of using that brief time to conduct my investigations. But that was not to be. I was too often bothered by Sita over several trifles. Her preparations for the marriage had already started. She once called me and said, "Since the bride's people will be visiting our home, please see that we have a pandal big enough to accommodate all of them." Another time she called me and said, "Please see whether my own jewellery looks too faded. It may have to be polished and brushed by a goldsmith." A third time she said, "Please see if the blackgram we have in stock will suffice." I was dead tired of hearing her "please see"s. My mind was bent on meeting granny before Narayana returned that evening. The proper place for the meeting would be the *Aswatha Katte* as usual. Janna would not come there to disturb us, but Manjunath of Jagadamba Vilas Hotel was likely to turn up. The biggest nuisance was Sita with her 'please see's. So in advance I warned her not to disturb me that whole evening. "Sita, today is Tuesday. Not an auspicious day to discuss things about the marriage. Tomorrow is a lucky day. So postpone all talk till tomorrow. You can then pour out everything you wish to say. Today, by the time I went to the garden to water the trees, you called me no less than sixteen times," I said.

Probably because of my mention of lucky and unlucky days, Sita felt a little shy. Observing it, I said to myself that I ought to study astrology a bit, so that I could refer to the almanac and be able to cite lucky and unlucky days, hours etc., in future. I could then use that knowledge as a lucky weapon to drive away Sita, whenever she tried to inflict herself on me. I then finished lunch and lay down for a nap.

In the afternoon, observing granny yawn after her siesta, get down from the verandah, and walk towards the peepul tree, I rushed to the rear of the cowshed. A mongoose ran across my path; but I didn't know whether it was a good omen or a bad one. I then picked up my curios which I had deposited on the wall of the cowshed. So far I had not taken the thigh bone for her examination.

Granny was sitting on the mound beaming with smiles. Seeing me she volunteered, "Ah, give me whatever it is you have." I gave her the things I had taken and sat near her with my hand under my chin. I was eagerly waiting for her words.

"My boy, these are broken bits that once formed a sea-shell necklace. Its wearer appears to have been a poor woman. I can make out her figure. She is wearing the necklace, but is clad only in a loincloth. She has a good figure. By her side is her husband, who is a bit darker than she. There is one other male figure. I think these were the people I saw yesterday. One of these must be a brother of the other. They are archers. But the woman seems to belong to some totally different group. She belongs to a far-off region. Oh, mani, she has been forcibly brought to this place. This would have normally ended in a fight. But once she joined them, she became quite fond of her husband. They have looked after her well. But her own position is that of a parrot in the cage. She must have wept a lot, dreaming of her own home.

"Ah, I see how it happened. This girl in her teens had been searching for crabs and molluscs in a river bed. Alone she waded into the water to bathe! A man saw and laughed. She felt afraid and looked round. When silence was restored she felt relieved; she got down to the water and began to play with it and to fill her mouth with it and squirt it. An archer crept forward from his hiding place and came near her. A beaming youth stared at her steadily and she ran away.

"True, she started running but nature and instinct made her behave differently. The desire for a man made her stop and he responded. Their eyes met...she went to her house and the youth returned to his place. It was a good distance away from the place. He consulted his people. Some cautioned him against taking her ; some said, "They may be our enemies !"

"I get the feeling that the people of this group form roughly ten family units. There are about fifty males but not even ten females to keep company. What can they do? Probably the youth went to that river spot once again and stood on watch there. She too came to the place and he accosted her. She saw him and screamed, but didn't hurry away as she did on an earlier occasion. And so the youth and his people took her to their camp.

"Necessarily, this raised a lot of commotion. Her father gathered his friends and searched for her. Like hounds on the scent they marched towards the *Ghat wall* with bows and arrows. The kidnappers were black–skinned people and the girl's people were brown-skinned. They met in battle and it was tumultous. It looks as if a hundred heads will roll down ; but it is funny to see the kidnapper and the leader of the brown-skinned people engage in a wrestling match. It all looks like a mock battle. The youth wins, the girl's side loses and the whole question ends in a compromise. So those who kidnapped the girl seem to gain her at the end of the fight. In *Puranas* they used to speak of 'demonical marriage.' Probably it was of this type."

"Probably so, granny."

"Yes, yes, it must be so. These people belong to the buffalo clan."

"That is?"

"They did not come to wage war, though they came in rage. I can see them dancing and kneeling before a shrine. Their priest is wearing the mask of a buffalo head and dancing.

Before him stands a pole, the top of which is decorated with buffalo horns.''

''Then to what clan do the boy's people belong ?''

''Let me observe first. I told you about the phallus and its counterpart in the cave-dwelling of those nudes. Beyond that, there are a few more things, I can't see them clearly in the darkness. There is an earthen pot placed upside down. It has the painting of a tiger's face on it. Then it must be a 'Tiger Clan.' Can there be a clan of that name? This shows there was one. Now I can make a guess. Perhaps the belief was that an alliance between the buffalo clan people and the tiger clan people was not advisable. The buffalo clan people out of fear for the tiger clan acknowledged defeat. They had to leave their girl there and once she became the property of the tiger clan, probably custom forbade her to rejoin her own people.

''Child, the 'Sudra' communities of our own village have similar 'clan' customs.''

''We have our 'gotras' – Vishwamitra, Bharadwaja, Vasistah and the like.''

''Yes, yes, but I don't think that we can trace our descent directly to those sages. It is as silly as these people imagining that they are descended from a buffalo or a tiger. But this clan distinction was very strictly adhered to. People belonging to the tiger clan would never hunt a tiger, those belonging to the buffalo clan would not hunt a buffalo. That was taboo.

''It must have all meant people worshipped or believed in certain spirits or deities. Else, there would be no sense in believing that human beings spring from tigers or buffaloes. Equally silly to believe in the offsprings of the sun and the moon. Enough of this for the day. ..Now tell me what happened at Janna's place? Did our guest go away?''

''He went away this morning.''

''Narayana?''

''Narayana accompanied him to the bus terminus. I will have to go to Shimoga the day after tomorrow to settle the marriage formalities.''

''So you have given your consent. How does your wife feel about it?''

''She is so fond of Narayana. Whatever pleases Narayana is sure to please her too. Even if I had said 'no,' she would not have allowed my opinion to prevail.''

''Your wife is not that stupid. She has common sense and forethought. The household runs because of her. She is quite unlike you.''

''That means?''

''If someone were to show you a bit of brass and say it is gold you would believe it...''

''So that is your estimate of my abilities?''

''You are made that way. How can you weigh more than your actual worth? Well, drop the matter. What did Janna say? Didn't they speak to his father?''

''They went there. The son asked them to speak to the father and the father asked them to speak to the son. All this happened because Janna had gone to their house to see the girl and told them that he would write to them on his return. They had entertained great hopes and had relied on his assurance. But granny, I learn rather unpleasant things about him. Your judgment was right. Perhaps Manjunatha and others have told you about him.''

"True, Manjunatha visited me; but he didn't tell me anything. He talked to me only about the temple of the Mother Goddess. Let him do some good work. He has immense belief in Her, and that has given him peace of mind."

Her reply surprised me. She seems to be able somehow to sense what others feel and think. That day, while dining, she remarked, 'Many more *payasas* will follow'. I thought she had overheard the long conversation in the kitchen between Sita and my brother. But it was not so. To predict so much by just looking at faces, sensing situations, is to have an abnormal ability. If I doubted her intuitions, why should I have spent almost three days with her and given her all those curios? She knows me well. How could granny invent so much of ancient history by herself? She has had very little schooling. Those stones, bones, shells, etc., are old relics once handled by people who lived many thousands of years ago. How can they ever appear again before granny's eyes, once they have become ashes after their death ?

It is like gazing into a crystal ball or gazing at plates smeaed with some magic ointment. When young, I had heard that by concentrating on such ointment-smeared plate, one could see God Hanuman who would lead the gazer to many wonderful places. He was said to show them hidden treasures too. But I have never believed all this. I have, in my youth, sung bhajanas about Hanuman, Sri Rama's valiant servant. But I have never come to accept the story of the Ramayana as having historical validity. In contrast, the tales told by granny seem historically more accurate.

My thoughts led me to a blind alley and I couldn't proceed further. Granny remarked, "What do you gain by sitting here? Go home and consult Sita about things you have to get ready if you must proceed to Shimoga. She will know the right customs.'' By then the sun was down in the western sky; Narayana had returned from Gangolly, after seeing off his friend. He looked cheerful, in spite of its coating of dust.

''Oh, you have returned,'' said granny.

''Yes, granny. You have given your consent, it seems. You are very generous.''

''All for the sake of sweet *payasa*. I wanted to have *payasa* as early as possible, on my grandson's score.''

She laughed and we too joined her. Both of us walked to the house. My children already sensing his arrival ran up to him and joyously clung to him chanting, 'Uncle has come.'' My brother then went to the well, drew water in a pot, washed himself clean, hung up his shirt wet with sweat, and went to my wife to report his arrival. She offered him jaggery syrup, which he drank with relish. The youngsters were also there to claim their share from his drink.

''How naughty! If it were not Narayana, would not a guest think that the children are starved at home?'' I remarked.

My brother smiled and said, ''No, no, how can I alone drink all this?''

''If you do it, your tummy will burst,'' quipped Kittanna.

''These youngsters are too clever'' I felt.

Freeing herself from work Sita sat in the verandah and asked, ''Did Anantharaya mention anything new?''

''Nothing special. He said he would be waiting for my brother at the bus-station in the evening. He has given up all hopes about Janna. He must have been disgusted with his wavering. What is Janna's age really? If he has no definite idea of marrying, why should he go to people, talk with them and raise unnecessary hopes in them? He should have some consideration for the parents of girls he goes to meet.

"They have some business there but no land or house in their native place. In Shimoga they own a little house. They have four children; Anantharaya is the eldest. Next is a brother and then come the two sisters. Since they do not have much property, they thought it wise to send their daughters to school and college."

"How far have the girls studied? Have they passed out of the seventh class?"

"Sister-in law, both of them graduated at Mysore."

"Graduation! For what earthly use? That would be a waste for girls."

"Oh, but that is your view. Then take it, that they have no education. Do you think it is easy to find alliance for girls, when they don't have any landed property? They felt that education itself was the best asset. But now that itself has led to trouble. It has become difficult to find boys with enough education. Their father had been searching for eligible boys even earlier, but the girls were keen on completing their graduation. So out of love for them he agreed to wait. The mother insists that the boys should be of our own caste."

"When did you give your horoscope to them ?" questioned Sita. "You should have asked me for it. I don't know how they managed to trap you."

My brother was a little taken a back. She, who had all along sided with him, now seemed to make a volte-face. He feared that she would raise objections to a girl who had taken her Bachelor of Arts degree. So, hesitantly, he asked, "What do you want me to do now?"

"Haven't you given your consent?"

"I have, in a way. That is why Anantha wants my brother there."

"Then what is the trouble?"

"You seemed to resent her degree."

"That is because I felt so much money had been wasted. Instead, if that money had been converted into jewellery and given along with the girl..." said Sita.

So now I had to intervene, "Sita, tell me how many maunds of gold they should bestow on her. I will ask them if they can do so......That would be one point which needs settlement when I go there tomorrow."

"Do you think I am so crazy as to stipulate such conditions? Ask them, like beggars, 'Give this and that'! Disgusting. She is their daughter; whatever they want to give her, let them. Your business will be to tell them what ornaments you will take with you, along with the ceremonial saree. There ends the matter."

I then exclaimed, wryly, "Oh, great lady, when we negotiate for a heifer or a cow we haggle about its price. You mean that I should bind my lips when negotiating for a girl?"

"Well, well, then you ask your granny, as to how much your father bargained, when he came to negotiate for his daughter-in-law. She will know it. He just said, 'We are satisfied with the girl,' beyond that he spoke no word. Even today my father praises your father's largeness of heart."

"Oh, Sita, when did that happen? Thousands of days ago. That was the '*Kritḥa*' age. This is the *Kali* age I cannot keep my mouth shut like my father."

"Then you please don't go to Shimoga. Narayana, if your brother goes there he will make a mess of things. I don't know what things he covets. You are the one to get married. Go straight to them; stay there and return home only after the wedding," she burst out in wild rage.

It was almost six in the evening the next day, when I reached Shimoga. I had a good dust bath during the journey. As if they had particularly come to see me in that condition, Anantha and his father Sadashivayya were waiting at the bus station. They took me home and even before I sat down enquired what I would like to have for a drink. "Drink and everything else can wait. Please let me bathe first. Let me get rid of the dust!" I exclaimed. I had no patience to wait for warm water on which they were insisting. Till I had a good bath I felt that I was not at all human. By then they had kept ready for me ever so many things to eat. It was a terrifying sight. I said, "None of these things for me. I shall have a little coffee and then rest. I shall have food after rest. I am dead tired from this journey." I then drank some coffee, and on their insistence ate two plantains and, to show that I was a man of my word, stretched myself on the carpet, there itself. After a deep slumber I woke up. I could not guess what time it was. My stomach had began to pinch. There were some five oranges near my pillow and an electric lamp was glowing above me. There was no sound of any body. I did not want to betray myself by consuming the oranges, and so covering myself with a cloth, began the second chapter of my sleep.

When I woke up, it was clearly morning and when I moved out of the room I met Anantharaya. He remarked, "You slept without dinner! We hesitated to wake you up. Did you at least sleep well?"

"Oh, yes, very very sound sleep. Now after I wash my face, I can sit with you and talk for hours on end."

When I returned, they offered me *idli, dosai* and excellent coffee. Anantharaya smilingly announced, "My father will come now. The girl who brought you coffee will be your sister-in-law." He then went out to bring his father. By then his mother also came and said "It must have been a tiresome journey. Some can cope with such hard things and some cannot." She made enquiries about my wife and children. Then she called in both her daughters. I looked at their faces intently. Then I remembered granny's remarks that the elder one was a little darkish, but charming. I responded to the mother's words with the remark, "Yours is a two-fold responsibility. Mine is just a single one and I have taken that too lightly."

"True, till yesterday that was our position. There are chances of that burden easing. Only yesterday a party that came on its own has seen the elder girl and given its consent too. The parents want a little time for the boy to secure leave. We may have to wait for a month or two. That is all."

Then came Sadashivayya, the girl's father. "We did wrong. We let a guest fast all night. You must kindly pardon us. Now it is your turn to speak. You should take us into confidence and treat us as your people. Now there is no trouble about our younger girl's marriage either. This place will be quite convenient to us for the marriage. If you want it to be celebrated in a place of your convenience, say a place like the Kollur temple, we are agreeable. We are also agreeable to the terms you suggest. You have to come and guide us," he said.

I felt that I should not display any false prestige before an elderly person like Sadashivayya. I asked him to send Anantharaya to me. When he came I said, "Anantharaya, you have seen our house and my people. I have seen your sister. My brother has already approved of her. The next thing is to settle details of the marriage. Any convenient place will do. Narayana wants it celebrated as early as possible. During the next fifteen days there are quite a few auspicious days. I leave it to you to decide about it. From now on we both belong to one family."

"How many people can we expect from the groom's side?" asked Anantharaya.

"Ours is a small family, we have very few relations. At best, some twenty people may come, but our granny will not move out of the house."

"Your granny won't move out! She is the eldest in your household. I have great regard for her. I want her to grace the occasion with her presence. My father feels that there need be no pomp. Whatever we intend to spend should benefit the new couple. We are natives of Haglur and our house deity is Mookambika. My father wants the marriage to take place before the Goddess. He will agree to any place to which your granny can come. If you feel that Kollur is too far, we can come to your village itself."

"No, no, you should not be put to that much of trouble."

This conversation was reported by Anantharaya to his parents, and finally we sat together and decided that the venue of the marriage would be the Kollur temple itself. I felt that somehow I could coax granny to come there. As for the quantity and the nature of jewellery, I did not speak a word. I could have left the place the next day, but they would not allow me to do so. It was only after the marriage invitations were printed in our joint names that I was allowed to return home.

On returning, I thrust a printed invitation into Sita's hands although I knew full well she could not read it, and then rushed to meet granny. She was resting near the well bund. I shouted "Granny, by your grace, I have fixed up everything."

"Then my child, this is neither due to my blessing nor due to your doing. Your would-be relatives are devotees of Mookambika. Take it as Her wish."

"Kollur is the venue," I said.

"I don't know how your brother will feel. Let him invite all his Shimoga friends. Let them come here. Let them join the bridegroom's party. If my backbone stands firm, I will also attend."

I told her hesitantly, "Granny, Anantharaya who came to us that day, insisted that the marriage should be celebrated in your presence."

"He said it! He is crazy! I am just a log. What special role have I to play?"

CHAPTER VII

If I enlarge pon the topic of my brother's marriage, one is likely to think I am trying to show off. If, instead, I just say 'The marriage was over, and everything went off well, 'my wife will get annoyed because her role in the marriage was fairly important. She pushed herself to the front a bit too much and enjoyed it too. I was annoyed by the fact that my own explorations were delayed, but to compensate for this, my granny, who had never left our village all these years, moved out to Kollur to be present at the marriage. Anantharaya was highly pleased about it. Granny had to trudge on foot some distance up to the macadam road, and then move in a bullock cart up to Kollur. The return journey was also accomplished the same way. On the first journey I kept her company. She was reluctant to stir out. 'How am I needed there, my child? Be assured, my mind and heart are there,' she said. I had to coax her to leave the house. The first three miles, by the forest path, would be an ordeal for her, I thought. But, when I found her walking the distance without the least fatigue, I was surprised ; 'Wonderful ! She could do it ! She is stronger than tamarind wood,'' I remarked. This feat of hers encouraged me to build a few castles in the air. Before the monsoon there would be no respite, but after that, I thought I could coax her to move with me among the hills and in the forests of my village and share with me her numerous visions. If possible, I would take her up to Nagankalu *Ghat* wall, show her the prehistoric caves and make her recount the past in greater detail.

Were I to confide these things to anyone he will surely doubt my sanity and say, 'This fellow really believes the day dreams of that old woman!' 'Why not?' is my question. You believe in the prophecies of astrologers who cast cowries and cook up things. You show your horoscopes to a clever fellow and make him tell you the position of good and bad planets. You show your palm to a palmist who will tell you a lot of unpleasant things about your past and future. Some go to fairs and pick up written slips from the beaks of tiny birds, on the basis of which the past and the future are interpreted. If even fifty per cent of the statements about your past appear to be correct your faith in what they forecast about your future is doubled. If you have the wisdom to write down on paper all these predictions, keep them for a period of twenty years and then verify, you would certainly realize that most of the predictions were false.

Predicting the future is riddled with uncertainties. But in delving into your past, not much risk is involved. That is why if some one says a few reliable things about our past we are foolish enough to accept whatever is predicted about the future. Many of the events supposed to have been seen by granny are already confirmed by ancient historical records. I have been accepting her words as true and so feel anxious to know more about them.

You must forgive me if I have developed such faith in her words, which to others may sound crazy. After all, I am her grandson.

My granny's visit to Kollur proved immensely profitable to me. Of course, the marriage dinners were excellent; the ceremony itself was grand. When all the functions were over, there was nothing for us to do. We spent the early part of the night simply waiting. Before evening set in, Narayana took his bride for a stroll in the streets of Kollur, which are not even three paces broad. The bride's mother must have resented this as it was foolish to take the bride out when she was wearing so many costly jewels. It must have struck Sita as very queer that this new educated sister should have cast away a bride's customary modesty and gone for a walk with her husband. My two children were to be found nowhere. Waiting for such a quiet time, I ventured up to granny and told her that we could go and sit in the outer verandah of the temple and enjoy a chat. That day, when people met her for the first time, a good number of them had gone up to her and had bowed before her out of respect for her age. A few talked to her nicely too. But after that no one came near her. So she responded to my request enthusiastically. I led her to the outer verandah and we sat there. Before us at a short distance, we could see a few pilgrims who had come there from neighbouring Kerala. To set the ball rolling I asked granny, "Isn't your first name Mookambika ?"

"It is in memory of this very goddess."

"I haven't heard of any other mother goddess being addressed by the name 'Mookambika'. What does the name mean ? One who doesn't talk ? Mother Goddesses like Durga, Kali and Chandi rouse fear in our minds."

"After all, they are the forms that we associate with her. Chandi, Kali, Durga show her terrible nature. But essentially that makes her the destroyer of evil forces. There is the name Mahishamardini, which she got as she killed the demon

Mahisha. Similarly this goddess is believed to have killed the demon Mookasura."

"Ah, that is it. It does not signify that she was a dumb person. That would mean that in olden days, a demon called Mookasura lived in these Kollur forests."

"So people believe."

"Then, you mean it is only people's belief? Am I to take it that god's incarnation, and slaying of wicked demons and all such things have no real basis?"

"What indeed do you yourself think about such matters?" She put it straight to me, and I felt a little embarrassed. In order to cover it up, I said, "I have no opinions about such matters. These things have been accepted as true by people for a long period. I too accept them. When evil dominates the world it is necessary for some one to come and destroy it. It is for that purpose that Vishnu was born as Matsya, Kurma, Varaha and so on. Siva has acted similarly and Parvathi too "

She said, "Those things don't make sense to me at all."

"You mean -?"

"The incarnations don't make sense to me."

"Why?"

"Is it necessary that God should take human form for the destruction of evil?

"Think, child. Does God need an *avatar* to kill an insect that He Himself created? However bad a man or demon is, he is but a tiny worm before God, even less than a worm! To kill it, must He assume an *avatar?* For instance, consider Rama's *avatar* to kill Ravana the demon. When did Vishnu get the first report of the atrocities perpetuated by evil demons? When did Rama set out to destroy them? After he got the first news, he is born as Dasaratha's child, grows up, spends some fourteen years or so in the forests and finally manages to kill Ravana! If He learns that evil is on the increase he should rush to the spot and crush it, then and there. Would you give an evil fellow some thirty years of grace to commit all sorts of mischief? What is the fate of those fellows who solely believed in His capacity to protect them from evil? This is too much nonsense to swallow.

"And child, for the sake of destroying any person why should He assume the form of a man or any other form? He could have flung a lightning at the wicked. It does not need a theatrical performance."

"Then you deny all these incarnations of God? If you yourself don't believe in them......"

"You see, He is one and, only one; we who perceive Him are thousands and thousands of persons with many minds. The numerous pictures are the creation of the numerous beholders. There is but one sky; a thousand seeing eyes cannot mean a thousand skies."

I was stunned by her logic. I could easily see that she never accepted several traditional beliefs. So, no wonder if my villagers, kith and kin think she is 'nuts' or possessed by spirits.

"So it comes to this-there was no Mookasura," said I.

"Child, this Kollur is not new to me. Your grandfather once brought me to this place with him. You have an '*Amma*' here. She is a silent being. During the day, you saw an idol in the sanctuary; even that did not exist in the very early times. Some one installed it at a later stage. I think there was small temple here. It contained a small idol of a 'female' deity. It was a stone carving and people called it '*Amma*' or mother."

"Was that at least true?"

"Which do you mean?"

"That the earliest God was a mere '*Amma*'? Now tell me, is God a man or a woman?

"He is neither. He is neither male nor female. He is neither a mother nor a father. An idol was carved and it was kept there. Then they began to worship it. For a child the biggest thing in life is its mother; not even its father. We grow up and, after so many years, when we are hurt even a bit, we scream 'Ah; amma!' That is why god became an '*Amma*'. There is nothing wrong in thinking so. Love for one's own mother is something vast, intense and real. Don't we feel that we can beg of her or bother her for whatever we want?"

"To some this *Amma* might have seemed like a mother, beating a naughty child. Whenever they experienced difficulties, they imagined that *Amma* corrected them through punishment. Kali and Durga became such mothers, mothers who chastise.

"The *Amma* of this place is of a still another kind. Any amount of praise or abuse will not influence her. No amount of begging will move her. Praise her or abuse her, she remains dumb.'You should accept whatever she may give you-good or bad. I think she is not kind to beggars. This is what sounds reasonable to me. I would not assert that my way of thinking is correct. I am not that intelligent. What I think, I say to you.

"Look up there, I now see a huge 'mother goddess' figure in front of me. Just there, where the stone idol is! There is nothing else, no walls, no roofs. She has huge breasts, a huge stomach; she has closed her eyes and her hands are resting on her thighs......I can read what she is thinking now. She seems to say, 'I have thousands of children; you are only one among them. I gave birth to you, suckled you... enough, enough, go away. Play, be happy, don't come to me a hundred times and bother me pleading "*Amma, Amma*" ', and so she sits with tight lips.

"Does it not sound natural ? Even after we are grown up if we are to go to her like children, and bother her with pleadings, 'Give me this' and with tales 'He pinched me,' 'He beat me'-how should she feel ? Wouldn't she in dismay think 'When will these children develop self-reliance ? When will they behave intelligently ?'''

Granny's words made me forget my own ideas such as 'Truth is one, the Brahmins think of it as many', and I began to dwell on the conception of this Mother Goddess, who would not like to converse with anyone at all. A mother unmoved by tears or bribes ! Even self-surrender to her would be of no avail. She appreciates human beings who dare to journey on their own under the guidance of their inner light.

From this my thoughts turned to the many early mother goddesses. Somewhere else resides a Dyamavva and a Kotturamma. In some place is to be found a Yellavva (mother of all) and in another a Savakka (sister of death). What kind of reasoning could have led early Brahmins to conceive these varied types of goddesses ? When I was thinking on these lines granny probably wanted to put a stop to such bewildering thoughts and said, "We have to move out in the early morning in the bullock carts ; don't we ?" It was as good as saying, 'For the present enough. Show me a place to lie down.' I took her to the house near the temple precincts where we were staying for the day. Our people had already stretched themselves in ever so many nooks. Ajji (granny) went to a nook of the yard and slept and so did I in some other corner.

I didn't get sleep the moment I lay down as I used to get. People of our party were lying around me in utter disorder.

Many were sleeping on the bare floor. All of them might not be sound sleepers. Usually I fall asleep quickly, but that day it did not happen at all. From the verandah I heard Kittanna cry, 'I too will come, daddy,' all in sleep. Probably he had gone about searching for me and then had slept in disappointment. He probably insisted on finding me and Sita might have scolded him for it. So crying, he probably lay down on the floor to sleep.

The moment I lay down and closed my eyes, a huge giant-like person stood before my eyes. He held a hefty mace in one hand. His eyes were emitting cinders. As in a painting by the *gudigars* he had stretched his tongue up to his chest. His hair was dishevelled. He just came and stood in front of me, but didn't utter a word. I was forced to begin the conversation. 'Who are you and what brings you here?' I asked. To my first question there was no reply. In answer to the second one, he raised his mace. I felt it would come down on my head in no time. Gaining courage, I remarked, 'Oh, great man, if you want to kill me, do so. But before you do so, please tell me who you are. I am from Moodoor, my name is Subraya. I came here for the marriage of my younger brother, Narayana. The marriage is now over; you missed it, unfortunately. You see, none of them is awake. There is no use killing sleeping souls. I alone am awake; very well, kill me and have the satisfaction of having done something great ."

I could see his lips parting in a smile. He probably liked the vein of my argument. I continued, "You have not yet told me who you are." He turned his mace, rested it on the floor and stood silent.

His pose was peculiar and so was his gesture. I had to interpret the movement of his mace and thinking quickly, I said, 'You mean to tell me that you belong to this place ; is that it?' He smiled once again. That meant he belonged to Kollur. Kollur meant in the native tongue, 'the killing place.' He might be the ancient Mookasura, I thought. Without a word he lifts his mace and puts it down. So Mookasura is still alive. Is this person real? While such thoughts filled my mind the apparition had vanished. One fact remains, that is the name of the place. It is Kollur, 'a place that kills.' It does not mean a place where people die. Every place would deserve that name. This might have been a notorious place, where dacoits waylaid travellers, and killed them. Then out of fear some one built a temple here for the deity and the fear of the deity put an end to the killing of travellers.

Some one who was sleeping by my side shook me, and woke me up ; I got up in a hurry and so did the others. We asked for the carts to be got ready. Those who could not walk got into bullock carts and our marriage party began its return journey. By about nine in the morning, we were back home.

For two more days, our house was full of noise and bustle. We celebrated the first coming of the bride to the house. The next day we had the *arati* ceremony. Things went well though my wife was not entirely satisfied. Sita was dissatisfied with the bride herself. She did not hide it ; instead she told her plainly, "For a few more days at least, till you move out of the house, don't talk to your husband before other people. Our people will say, 'What a shameless girl !'" To this it seems she replied, 'All that was in your time !' This completely reversed Sita's opinion of the girl. She felt it was silly of Narayana to have chosen and married this chatterbox. Of course, this was understandable. When Sita came as a bride to this house, for one full year, she would not open her lips. When she found that the new girl, unmindful of the elder co-daughter-in-law, was talking to all and sundry, Sita called Narayana and told him, "You please order her to be quiet. Any way you are going to Shimoga and will start a new home there. There she can feed on only words."

At the close of the summer vacation both of them went away to Shimoga and Sita found time to unburden herself about the utter defeat she suffered at the hands of her new relation. "Really, I think they might have known each other quite intimately for over a year. Anantharaya's arrival here and their request to you and to me were sheer play acting. Even if we had not given our consent they would have married. No use thinking about it," she complained and moaned.

"It is a fact that they are married. They liked each other and that's that."

Well, I have now finished telling you about one offshoot of the marriage. Now I must tell you another. You might imagine that I never invited Janardhan to this function. He is an intimate friend and one of the most important persons of our village. So I went to him and requested him personally 'to come and grace the occasion with his presence.' 'I'll try,' he had replied. But he never turned up. That only means he didn't have the courage to come. How can he face Anantharaya, or the bride's elder sister? At Shimoga, he had eaten half-a-dozen sweets served by her. That foolish girl might have thought, 'He must be deeply in love with me.'

Now, in my village, the marriage formalities had to be continued according to local custom. So I arranged the formal *arati* and *akshata* ceremony in my house and sent invitations to all my neighbours in the village. As for Janardhan I had chosen to go to his place a second time myself. I met his father and showed my dissatisfaction with their absence. His father in reply said, 'Is it not an alliance which my son rejected?'

I said nothing in reply but only asked him, "Where is Janna?"

"Oh, he went away to Vandase this morning. I think he will go from there to Coondapoor and so on." I had to listen to the old man's criticism of his own son.

Finally, it happened that Janardhana did not turn up even for the *arati* ceremony. That hurt me very much. But for these two events I must say all things went on well. Our new relations stayed for one more day after the *arati* and visited their cherished native village Haglur. Narayana accompanied them on the visit. I was busy all the time. I was surprised and pleased to find my sister-in-law in hearty conversation with my granny, on the *aswatha katte*, when no one of her party was at home. I do not know how Sita felt. I felt a little jealous about it too. For, after all of them returned to Shimoga, I had planned to show granny one last bit of curio, the piece of thigh bone. Since it was a piece of bone, I was hesitant to pass it on to her. Another remark I may make about the behaviour of our new relatives with granny. They had told me that they had very great regard for her, but never did I see them talking to her leisurely. Probably to compensate for this negligence just before they left they went to her and said, 'Granny, we are leaving; we seek your blessings.' She just smiled at their words.

After all of them had left, Sita felt that she had regained her status as mistress of the house. She openly expressed it: "This is Narayana's and his bride's house; not mine or yours —that was how I felt!"

I consoled her saying, "Today's educated girls are like that. They did not grow up in village traditions. So how can you expect her to curb her tongue ?"

We were sleeping in the verandah that night ; the two children were asleep a little away from us. All of sudden, Sita remarked, "Granny, after all, is of unsound mind."

"What is the matter ?" I asked.

"I was shocked at the manner in which she spoke to one of the relatives."

"Who spoke to whom ?"

"Your granny to Anantha"

"I didn't see any of them coming near her !"

"He did come to talk to her. I was then in the next room. Your granny was very pointed in her enquiries ; but the whole thing was confusing to me."

"What exactly happened ?"

"From one angle it seems right ; from another, utterly wrong."

"First, tell me what happened......"

"Anantharaya came and sat by granny's side and said, 'It was gracious of you to have come and guided the marriage celebrations !' These words seemed to have annoyed granny ; she said, 'I came because of my grandson's wish. That I am responsible for the successful celebration of the marriage and all that is not true. What can an old woman like me do ?' Their conversation continued. What they were talking about I am not sure. Then granny casually asked, 'Anantharaya, is that not your name? How many brothers have you?' and he replied, 'I am the first, then there is another brother; after him come our two sisters and then two brothers...'

"Then you are the eldest. You are unmarried. So now get married soon. It is proper that the girls are married first, but you too must be married. You should not get spoiled by undue delay in your marriage."

"Somehow, I am not inclined to get married."

"If you feel that marriage is not a good thing, why did you run about for the marriage of your sister?"

"I don't feel its urgency at present. My inclinations are unusual. I have no liking for wordly life. I am more spiritually inclined."

"Who told you that marriage comes in the way of spiritual enlightenment ?"

"Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Vivekananda."

"I don't know who they are. A few I have seen dodged marriage and later I have seen them living an unbecoming life. Spirituality is all right in its way. At Kollur I have seen you moving about during the marriage. I recognised no spirituality in you. Better think and feel that you are like anybody else."

"Marriage leads to bondage."

"Ah, that! You think, woman becomes a fetter to man. Your Rama and Krishna were married. If God also felt that woman led to the bondage of man, he would not have created anything at all. Man and woman, male and female, are no creations of ours. The creator who made it that way could not have been so stupid as to have created them without a reason. He must have had a purpose, otherwise why did He make them different? Why should you and I think that we are more intelligent than God?"

"Then, why do they say that celibacy and *Sanyasa* are superior states?"

"Each is superior at a particular age. Just because you have not married, it doesn't mean you are celibate; nor will you be a recluse. There are a thousand and one fake *sanyasins* and *brahmacharies*. This is the proper age for you to marry. Go and get married."

"I won't be like any one else, granny. I know my mind well."

"It is not that your feelings for God, spiritualism or emancipation are not gunuine. The Puranas speak of a number of sages who lived with their families. Nowhere did I hear that they could not attain *Moksha*. Having a family or *samsara* never comes in the way of devotion to God."

"But I have made up my mind."

"Oh, then it is a decision! I don't want to come in your way. I felt you were young and could understand me a little. Now I'll tell you when you have to make such resolutions—it is when the image of woman no longer haunts your mind even in your dreams. Then decide. Till then realize that you are like anyone else. Reading books is not going to help you lead the life of celibacy."

"Do you think that I think of women day and night?" asked Anantha; to which she replied, "Because I think so and I felt you were one of those close to me I thought I could advise you."

He got furious and said, "I know my mind. I don't seek your advice."

"Why should I come in your way?" said grandmother.

After reporting this matter Sita said to me, "It is not becoming of her to talk in this fashion to people who chance to come to our house. Why should she feel that she can know him better than he knows himself?"

"Granny does not say things without real understanding."

"You please keep quiet. You don't at all realize your granny's lunancy."

"Oh, great lady, I hardly realize my own follies, let alone granny's."

"She unnecessarily provokes discussions."

Getting impatient I told her, "Had I known all this earlier, I would not have gone to her at all to seek her advice on the marriage negotiations."

Just then I heard granny's voice from her room; "My child, don't quarrel with Sita because of my follies."

CHAPTER VIII

It would have been extremely difficult for me and Sita to manage things during the marriage festivities had it not been for the kind assistance of Manjunatha and his wife. They both came to my house and took over all our responsibilities. In fact, they carried the entire burden of looking after every guest. They went to the length of seeing off our relatives-going with them to Vandse in a bullock cart and seeing them off safely in the river-boat. Till then I could hardly breathe.

Hindgana, Manjunatha's village, is hardly two miles from my village. There is a 'Mother Goddess' shrine there. Manjunatha's family have great faith in this Goddess whom they have been worshipping from times immemorial. I had seen the shrine, once or twice. I had never entered it but only stood at the outer door, bowed and come my way. I don't remember any details about it. Not so with Manjunatha. He has immense faith in her. "Even Kollur Goddess is false; but Amma of Hindgana is genuine," he would say. When he speaks of '*Amma*' as Jagadamba, one may think that he is talking of the idol of some world-famous shrine. But actually he is thinking of '*Amma*' of Hindgana. Every year he makes a trip to his village, to celebrate her festival on a grand scale. This year the temple roof has received a new thatch and he will return to Mysore after a gala celebration. The real difficulty in carrying out his ambitious schemes is the dearth of Brahmin families in this region. Even to have a gathering of a hundred Brahmins locally for any religious ceremony becomes a difficult job. Hindgana proper has just four Brahmin houses. If Manjunatha feels that he should celebrate *Amma's* festival on a grand scale he will have to go even to distant villages, and invite every Brahmin family personally. That means trudging a stretch of land between Kollur and Byndoor, and between Vandse and Kamalashile. However, it is not enough if he just goes to them and extends his invitation. The greatness of the Goddess has to be brought home to them. But it is likely to attract a good gathering this time. They know that he will spend liberally and pay each Brahmin liberally too. He has requested a very famous scholar—priest, Alemane Jois, to conduct the important ritual of Lalitha Sahasranama, chanting the thousand hallowed names of the Goddess. It is Manjunatha's ardent desire that I should be infected with his zeal. How can we, husband and wife, so easily forget the wonderful help we received from him and his wife during Narayana's marriage? It is easy for us to go to his place and settle there comfortably-but, that is all. But in the matter of so many things that need to be done, I am totally useless to him. I would only add to his burden. My capacity is limited to a few jobs in my own house. I may water the garden, chew betel, chat with granny and finally scold Sita-that is all I am capable of. But even then, I had promised to be with him from morning till evening on the day of the ceremony. "If I come in the morning, I will have to return by nightfall, as I cannot leave granny alone at home. Sita may stay there as long as she likes. It is left to your goddess to extract as much service as she can from me," I had promised.

He had said, "No no, I don't want you to do anything. There are others to do everything. It is enough if you come and sit there leaning aganist a pillar."

"Oh, yes, "I had promised.

Manjunatha's other wish was that my grandmother should also be taken to that place. Even if it meant carrying her in a palanquin, he would accept the idea. This request had made granny remark, "Let us see. I saw your goddess long back. No reason why I should not see her again. Didn't I visit Mookambika? It is left to her to take me if Kotalamma desires my presence there."

I was quite surprised to hear for the first time in my life, the name of Goddess 'Kotalamma.' Could there be such a name at all? 'Kotala' in Kannada means chickenpox. People had created a Goddess of Smallpox; this one then is the Deity of Chickenpox. I thought if I went there that time, I should see the temple in greater detail. I should go to the sanctum and see the figure of the goddess there. But by chance I went with Manjunatha a few days earlier than I had planned to. It was quite near our place, just some three miles away. Before taking me to his house, Manjunatha took me to the temple. The temple stood on a mound. All round it grew trees and bushes ;Manjunatha had got some space cleared. It was a small structure, barely three 'squares' large, its walls covered with dark moss. But the ancient temple-site seemed to encompass the area of the entire mound. That means a vast building covering the site like a huge courtyard. Coolies engaged by Manjunatha were putting up a large pandal before the shrine. Manjunatha discussed with the *Malekudis* the work that was to be done. Meanwhile, I came out and stood before the door of the sanctuary. An oil-lamp was burning inside and, in its feeble light, I could see a heap of flowers covering a stonelike object, dark with oil residue. I could not make out the shape. 'What a shame!' I said to myself. When Manjunatha can feel the presence of the Goddess any time he stands there, why should I not be impressed in the same way? Does this mean that there is something wanting in my devotion? So to compensate for this, I bowed my head and joined my palms in all humility. When he called to me, I walked with him to his house, which was barely two furlongs away. Sridevi, his wife, was there to greet me. His house was fairly big, some eight to ten 'squares' in extent. Before it, already, a pandal had been put up, it could easily accommodate four hundred people for a feast. The floor too had been smoothened and polished. When I saw the size of that pandal I could not but exclaim, "Manjunatha, I did not have a pandal half this size even for the marriage of my brother!"

"That is different. You had guests only for a marriage, your relatives from Shimoga were also few, so the pandal you had was more than adequate."

"That is not what I meant. When you have a fairly large pandal in front of the temple, why have an equally large one here?"

"Mr. Subbarao, all religious ceremonies like *Chandika Homa, sahasranama* and worship take place there. But I can't have the feast there because there is not enough water in the temple well."

"This is large enough to hold almost five hundred people. How many do you expect?"

"Oh! Wait, wait till tomorrow, you will see your calculation proved wrong. My son has gone from nearby Vandse to far off Kollur and Byndoor, to invite people. During my grandfather's time a thousand people were fed here each year. During my father's time, not being able to pay the land revenue, we lost our lands. My childhood began in stark poverty. It is now the

'Mother' who is putting enough money into my hands. How can I afford to forget Her goodness? If She continues to bless me, I intend to celebrate this festival every year hereafter."

"Every year, you say! It would be worth it, if people come and participate!"

"Why shouldn't they come? If they fail to come this year, they are sure to do so next year, if only Mother continues to look after me in the same kindly manner. She cannot but do so. I am going to renovate Her temple. I am going to raise the walls of the sanctum and have a four—faced roofing, covered with copper sheets! I would like to raise a fine courtyard with four walls and with pillars inside, supporting a nice roof. I am sure that 'She' will get these things done through me."

I was stunned by his ambitious schemes. It would cost him no small sum, may be ten thousand rupees or even twenty thousand! Talk in this strain, without the slightest apprehension, indicated a substantial annual income. More than that, I could visualize his largeness of heart, which prompted him to spend so much on such a fancy!

Manjunatha's house was a modest one with a nicely kept yard, kitchen, bath room and verandah. He is about six or seven years my senior and it is only because of our intimacy that I dare address him in the singular. Financially he is better off than I. I think my wife and his wife are daughters of fairly close cousins. Manjunatha and his wife have four sons and the fifth child is a girl, who was named 'Amba' after the Mother Goddess. Two of his older sons work with their father in the hotel business; the younger ones go to school in the town.

Though so near, I have not visited Hindgana for many a year now and so do not have intimate knowledge about its residents. But I am told that granny had visited the place in the good old days. I cannot remember when. She has not gone there for some time, about that I am certain.

After food and rest at Manjunatha's place I was anxious to visit a house or two and also have an idea of the local paddy. But I am afraid I had eaten more than was good for me. Sridevi, the hostess, had pressed me very much, saying now and again that I was a rare visitor.

So, after a heavy meal, I was given a carpet and pillows, and requested to rest and sleep as long as I liked! I chewed betel and then stretched myself, immediately to be enveloped by deep slumber. In my dreams was a vision of all the festivities that were to come in honour of the local goddess. By the time I woke up, coffee was ready, and I drank it.

After his nap, Manjunatha went towards the temple. Pointing out to me one of his sons, Shankaranarayana. he said, "I believe you are not in a hurry. Let me to go the temple for a while. If you want to go anywhere you can take my son." His eldest son Laxminarayana had gone to Byndoor on some errand. So with the idea of going out for a stroll, I called his second son Shankaranarayana. I asked him "What is worth seeing in your town? I hear that there was one house quite well-known to my granny. When she learnt that I was coming here she wanted me to look up an old friend of hers. She told me that this lady was blind. Which house is it? Please, can you take me there?" The boy replied, "It is not very far from here. The house you refer to is probably Tippajji's. Let us go."

As we walked, we had to pass through a patch of very thick forest, overgrown with cane creepers. It made me think that the name 'Hindgana', which means crowded forest, must have been conferred by that very spot! As we passed through the thicket, our faces were scratched a dozen times, our clothes got caught on cane thorns a few times and, worse than that, there were the leeches, eager to suck our blood. After going a good distance, Shankaranarayana jokingly said, "I thought this was a short cut ; I should have brought you across the paddy fields ; though a little longer, that route would not have caused so much trouble."

"But, having come this way, we will see it through. We can return by the other route," I said. After the forest patch, we walked towards a straw-thatched house. Two very thin children were playing in the yard. They joyously shouted Shankanna's name. He enquired of them about Tippajji.

A voice responded from the verandah of the house. "It looks like Shankanna. Who else has come ?"

Shankaranarayana answered, "Ajji, some important guest has come to your house."

"Who but the devil comes to my house to look up a blind old woman ?" she remarked.

We both went and stood before the extremely old and wrinkled lady. Shankaranarayana introduced me to her with the remark, "Ajji, I have brought Subbaraya from Moodoor to visit you."

"Which Subbaraya ?" she asked. She raised her hands to the level of her eyebrows and creased her forehead skin in an attempt to guess who it was. To save her the trouble, I told her straightaway, "Ajji, it is me, Subbanna. Mookajji's grandson Subbanna, if you can remember."

"Subbanna, Mookajji's grandson Subbanna. Say so ! Who can make sense of 'raya' and 'geeya' ?"

Then words poured from her lips, "Oh, it is you Subbanna, you were very young when I last saw you. I used to come to your house till my eyes completely failed me. Now, I have been relegated to a corner for twenty, thirty years. I think the same thing must have happened to your grandmother too.''

''No, no, she is up and active. Her eyes are as clear as crystal.''

''Is that so? Who is there to tell me these things? This is a house with no men. My daughter-in-law, these two tiny children and I are the people who live here. We are living here like forest recluses. My son turns up once a year for just four days. Enough of my tale. Is Mooki well?''

''Oh yes.''

''I mean–can she see clearly, and walk about? I was told that she has a flickering mind, and goes frequently into queer moods.''

''Nothing like that, Ajji; you see, I am now a little more than thirty years. I don't feel that way at all. It is true that the people of our village have been calling her a lunatic. Who can stop people talking rant? It is true that she is a person unlike any one else. If that is why they want to call her insane, let them. What do we lose?''

She then called her daughter-in-law and asked her to offer us something. No amount of pleading would dissuade her. The more I saw of her, the deeper grew my esteem for her. Her body seemed to have shrunk to half its natural size. Every square inch of it was set in wrinkles. Her speech was slow and faint. The words trickled from her mouth. Instead of talking about herself she said, ''See, my child, I think that our Manjunatha has proved true to the soil. It seems he is going to renovate *Amma's* temple. But for him, who would have cared for this goddess 'Kotala?' ''

I broke in and said, "My granny also referred to her as 'Kotalamma', you too call her by that name. Only Manjunatha calls her 'Jagadamba'. Which is the real name of this Mother Goddess of Hindgana?"

"Amma, Jagadamba, Kali, Durga-all are the same. She is the Mother of all."

"That I can guess. But I don't know how the name 'Kotala' came to be used."

"Why not? A god has ever so many names, there are ever so many legends about him, but they all refer to one Power. Now tell me, your grandmother is hale and hearty; is she moving about the house? How many years have rolled by without my seeing her!"

"You know her well?"

"My child, she is younger than I by three years. Poor thing, she lost the joy of wearing vermilion on her forehead when she was quite young. From that time her life acquired a strange twist; she stopped talking to outsiders. Whenever I called on her she would say, "Sister, at least you are kind enough to visit me. No one else does so."

"Is that so? But then how was it that no one wanted her at all?"

"No, no, not that others did not want her. But from her youth a queer *Jakni* has possessed and tormented her."

"You say she is possessed by a *Jakni* ? Ever since I have known her, I have seen no such trouble."

"In the early days it was so. I can't say what it is now. On occasions, something used to possess her and she would talk incoherently. At the very sight of people she would say, 'You are like that,' 'You are like this.' Not always, but when she became possessed."

"Was she talking insanely?"

"No, I cannot call it insane. When we considered what she said, we found that she was always right. But, child, if we were to tell someone, 'You are a thief; you committed that blunder or did this mischief,' what would people think?"

"What do you think was the spirit that used to possess her?"

"Your grandfather took so much trouble to find out. He engaged a wizard too. But nothing came out of it."

"My father never told me about these things."

"By the time your father grew up, she had almost given up speaking. She used to sit in a corner of the house and declare she had nothing to do with this world. Sometimes she would be holding a string of beads in her hands. I don't know anything about the later part of her life. I have yearned so much to see her. But I have no eyes to see and no strength to walk."

"Even now my granny can walk without difficulty. Recently she joined us on our Kollur trip. Of course, the trip was made in a bullock cart, but to catch the cart she had to walk nearly three miles."

"Is that so?"

Just then Shankaranarayana stood up to go, saying, "Please carry on. I shall call on Jois and return in a short while." After he was gone, Tippajji remarked, "Is Shankanna gone? Good." I could not guess why she said so. I said, "Ajji, if you are so eager to see my granny, it can be managed. Manjunath is keen on having her for the festival. Granny, on the other hand, is reluctant. But if she is pressed, she may come. If she comes to the temple, she could cover the short distance and call on you too."

"Subbanna, please don't bring her," she said as if frightened at the prospect.

" Why are you frightened, Ajji? Don't you want her to visit the temple or is it that you don't want her to undertake the tiresome journey?" I asked.

"Both, equally. You will not understand it. You say she is in good health. If she comes here again, she is bound to get disturbed. It was her first visit to this very place that upset her mentally. I was here that day. I was terrified and felt very humiliated. If you were to ask me, I am sure it is the very *Amma* who took possession of her that day."

"You mean that she visited Hindugana *Amma*?"

"Yes, my child. This very Manjunatha's grandfather had arranged for a grand worship. All your people came to witness the festival. Hundreds of others too had come. When they were about to wave the *arati* at the end of the ceremony your grandmother, who was sitting amongst us womenfolk, let out a terrible shriek. She got up. Her body began to shiver, and we, who were sitting around her, felt miserable. Then the worst happened. Mooki, who at that time was a young woman, all of a sudden cast away her clothes, tore her hair and with burning eyes began to laugh and scream. People round her got panicky and a few even ran away in fear. Then your grandfather with some one else, rushed at her, caught hold of her with a great effort and took her away. They poured cold water over her head. She fought like a tigress. She would bite and tear away at anyone who tried to restrain her.

"She was finally bound hand and foot and carried home. She was confined to a room and for three days, I am told, she did not regain her senses."

I could hardly believe Tippajji's words. Why would Mookajji have behaved that way? Suppose she was possessed by the deity or a devil, which of them would have liked to dance naked? With this thought in mind I asked her, "Ajji, when she was in that frenzy, didn't some one ask her, 'Who are you, why have you come and what do you want?"

"Some one would have done so probably. I was there quite near her, when I observed her shivering from head to foot. But when she cast away her clothes, I felt shocked and ashamed. It was as if I had undressed myself; I simply ran away from the spot, not being able to see the sight. Who could speak to her in such a state?"

"After tying her up at least...."

"Even afterwards, she continued to scream. 'You dislike my naked form? You have forgotten the mother that gave you birth. Your mother, too, does not need you.' So she kept shouting. Who could understand her? If the great Mother herself was not respected by us, would Manjunatha's grandfather have arranged for that ceremony?"

"So till the end nobody could discover which deity it was that took possession of her?"

"I learned that your grandfather got a famous *mantravadi* and through him asked her that question. Then the answer came that she was 'Bhagavathi.' It was only after a lot of appeasement, I learned, that the spirit left her."

When I heard that word 'Bhagavathi' I began to dwell on that name of the goddess which, throughout Kerala, is held in great reverence. I began to think about its etymological derivation. I could then conjecture why granny cast away her clothes and stood naked. She was imagining herself to be 'Bhagavathi' which means literally possessor of the female genitals. If any queer notion or sight were to impress itself on my granny's subtle mind, she would certainly become oblivous of her own person and merge into an assumed personality. Hence, bringing her to Hindgana to see *Amma's* worship would be dangerous, I reflected.

I had spent some time with granny's old friend, Tippajji, listening to her tales about granny, when Shankaranarayana returned and said, ''Now we may leave.'' I touched Tippajji's feet and bowed to her.

As I was leaving her, she said, ''Please come again and talk to this log of wood. Tell Mooki that Tippajji is well and enquired about her health.''

I had to accept the drink offered by her daughter-in-law before I left. This time Shankaranarayana took me by the easy route, by the edge of the paddyfields. I was in a hurry to go home. But Manjunatha would not let me alone. He persisted in following me to my place and when we reached the temple he asked me, ''How is our 'Ambavana' ?''

''Ambavana ! That is on the Kutachadri mountain ?'' I said, remembering the name of the famous forest atop Kollur.

''The forest here too is Ambavana,'' he said with pride.

''So it is,''I said in appreciation of his faith in that goddess. He once again went to discuss something with the workers. Just then, the evening sun lit up the temple door. I went near it. It was closed, but a slit between two planks showed me what was inside. A lamp was burning there and I gazed through the slit to see the idol. But there was no idol there. There was an empty pedestal over which must have stood a 'linga' sometime in the past. Behind it, at a short distance, there was a rough heavy stone, on which were stuck two eyes made of silver. I wondered which of them represented *Amma*—the stone that stood behind or the empty pedestal in front?

On the way home, I put this very question to Manjunatha. He could not imagine why the idol was behind the empty pedestal. He explained that they had stood there like that from time immemorial. "And what do you think of the idol itself? It is a big dark crude piece. On it, the outlines of eyes, mouth, legs and hands have been roughly carved. There are no marks to suggest clothes. That the work is crude is obvious. It is dressed up in a skirt below the imaginary waistline. Since the hands are not distinct, there can be no bangles. Where the head appears, we stick up two eyes of silver. After all, what ornaments does she crave from us? She is herself an ornament to the world. She has created the world. We, out of devotion, offer her arecanut flowers and *kunkum* and apply oil to her head."

"In the morning the pedestal was covered with flowers," I remarked.

"Flowers there may have been. The pedestal may not belong to that idol. It has a pit-like depression in it. There may have been a linga in that place at some time. Now nothing remains. The custom has been to place some flowers on that empty pedestal. It is still being followed."

I returned home with him. And after chatting with my wife, he returned home.

That night, my sleep was full of dreams concerning the goddess of Hindgana. That temple has probably stood there for two thousand years. In recent times forests had engulfed the area.

In my dreams, I witnessed the sacrificial chopping off of the heads of cattle and sheep. I dreamed of the temple priest, standing with a sword in hand, speaking on behalf of the goddess, to the accompaniment of village pipe music. Hundreds of devotees stood before her, each pouring out his or her own miseries and seeking her protection.

The next moment I dreamt another gruesome scene. A huge pyre of wood was lit, then its cinders were spread on the ground, and her devotees - men, women, and even children-walked on it in religious frenzy. I had heard of such things but not witnessed any such ceremony. So I was really intrigued by such devotion.

At another time I dreamt an incredible scene. A woman came to the door of the shrine, and placed on the sanctum threshold her own child. She said, ''According to promise I have brought my child to you. Accept it!' It was sacrificed the very instant. After this the entire spectacle changed. Even the temple vanished, and in its place I saw a piece of stone that stood as a symbol for 'Amma'. The stone grew in size, its top touching the skies and its base reaching the nether world. Her waist began to expand and occupied vast regions, when darkness enveloped everything consuming me and my consciousness in the process. In that state, probably I experienced deep slumber. When I was about to wake up, my tongue was fumbling with the question, 'When is it going to be day? When am I going to enter the world?' When I opened my eyes I could see the sun peeping at me from behind the fronds of a coconut tree.

CHAPTER IX

Manjunatha celebrated Hindgana *Amma's* festival with pomp and gusto. I had imagined that few people would come to that forest nook, but I was wonder-struck at the sight of people who gathered there from over a distance of fifteen to twenty miles. The '*homa*' ceremony, the chanting of the thousand names of Goddess Lalita and all such rituals went on extremely well, filling the vast pandal with smoke emanating from the sacrificial fire. There were more than three hundred Brahmins belonging to Manjunatha's community and over five hundred others who were all fed and treated very generously. Because of Manjunatha's large—heartedness, everything went on well. In fact, when I watched the efficiency of Manjunatha and his sons, I had to hang my head in shame because I had not been able to cope with a hundred guests at the time of my brother's marriage.

I had felt sorry that I could not oblige Manjunatha by taking granny to the festival. But after hearing so much about her from Tippajji, I lost all courage. Sita also thought similarly but for a different reason. "She need not go there. It is better that she and I stay at home so that you can go there with the children. You know her unbridled mouth. There is no telling what she will blurt out when she sees anyone," said Sita, expressing her fears. So, on the appointed day, with my two children I went to take leave of granny. Though Manjunatha had pressed granny to go with me, till then I had never broached the topic with her. But just that morning she, on her own, told me, "Child, I don't know if I can walk that distance. I saw that *Amma* once when I was young. Before dying I would like to visit her once again. I would also like to take the occasion to look up Tippakka. Even if she has become blind, at least I have sight left to see her, and I can talk to her." That upset my plans completely.

She continued, "I know that you and your wife have decided not to take me. Tell Sita that I will hold my mouth under lock and key; she need have no fears about me. Let her come too."

Now, there was no alternative and I had to start with the entire family. All along the way, my children were talking unceasingly. Sita followed granny. We first went to the temple premises. Granny saw the large gathering, as well as the decorations for the occasion. She went and stood before the sacrificial fire pit, rubbed her eyes when the smoke made the eyes smart, and then moved on towards the sanctum. Fearing something untoward, I rushed after her. Granny stood before the sacrificial fire and muttered, "A great mother you are ! You play a thousand games. Your sport changes with time and today you have let these children play this sport."

The next moment she ordered me, "Child, take me to Tippakka's house."

"First, we shall go to Manjunatha's" I said and took her there. Even in that bustle, Sridevi, the hostess, hurried to receive us and engaged us in pleasant conversation. Since I knew that she would have no time to attend to grandmother and the festival dinner would be very late, I said, "We have other places to visit, so let's move now if you really want to visit Thippakka."

" Oh, I can walk," said granny. We walked by the edge of the paddy fields, till we reached Tippajji's place ; we washed our feet in the pond before her house and stepped into the yard. I could see Tippajji holding a rosary in her hands and sitting in the verandah of the house. "It is me, Subbanna. I have brought granny with me," I said loudly, so that she could hear. But granny broke in with, "Sister, so now has come the propitious moment to see you again. It is all due to Manjunatha and his *Amma's* celebrations. His hopes as well as yours have now come to fruition". She went and sat by Tippajji. She gently caressed Tippajji's back, lifted her chin and peeped into her blinded eyes. When she took her aged fingers into her palms that lady just broke into tears and said, "Mooki, you still have strong legs and hands; God has spared your vision too. I could never have made a visit to you; but it is still possible for you to come and meet me."

Granny replied, "Tippakka, I came here for that very reason; I could have done it long back too. I had to think much before coming here, you know why. Long ago I came here and nothing but suffering resulted from it. I was determined not to see the face of 'Amma' again. It was her mischief, it was she who had brought me to this place before. She told me, "Child, I wear no clothes and you need not also. Who am I? Bhagavathi. You are my daughter." Believing her words, I imagined I was a child, and danced about throwing away my clothes. You know the result. To treat my supposed insanity, a hundred lunatics joined together, and tortured me in a thousand ways. They said I was possessed by *Jakni*, *Bobbarya*, or *Brahmarakshasa* and all such beings and beat me mercilessly. It was then I stopped talking to people and I was dumb for quite a long period.''

Tippajji said, ''Why did you come today? It is the festival of the same goddess, you know.''

''Today I steeled my mind to come. I have not forgotten anything of the past. That is why I went to *Amma* first and remarked to her, 'Oh, what an actress you are! Each day you put on a different guise.' I gave her what she deserved.''

''You have already gone and returned. Why should you have uttered all that nonsense before 'Amma'? If someone had heard you would he not have thought you insane?''

''They have declared me insane long back. I felt like saying so to *Amma*, and did. I feel like laughing at her ways. Tippakka, of all *Ammas*, this one of Hindgana is the most mischievous! She has put on a thousand guises. I can see through each one of them.

''She created the world; she begot lives; she reared them and became their mother.

''She who created them, wanted tributes and offerings from them. She even asked for blood. She fed on sheep and buffaloes; sometimes human babes too.

''Her devotees believed her; dacoits and thieves believed her too; so did priests and wizards. She assumed a thousand forms. She, as woman, became all; she said - 'No male without me.' She became Bhagavathi; she herself became '*Bhaga*'. She ordained that 'Bhaga' itself be worshipped.

''The moment I stood before her temple I realized her multitudinous ways. She delivered babes, fed them, fondled them and ultimately swallowed them. Devotees waved '*Arati*' to her, offered fruits to her, butchered fowl and sheep before her. The male worshipped the female and the female worshipped the male. They drank intoxicating drinks, ate meat, worshipped the phallus and the *yoni*. They imagined that from such worship they would attain every kind of wealth, power and joy; they danced about in a wild mad way.

''The male exists, because of me; if not everything is naught,' she told me. I enjoyed seeing and hearing her. I had my dig at her too.''

With these words pouring out of her mouth, granny looked like a different person altogether. I felt that she herself had put on *Amma's* garb and was talking as if possessed by her. She was overcome with emotion. She was holding one hand of Tippajji who too seemed to have been lost in her emotions. She was so attentively listening to granny's words, with tightened lips, and stone-like, that I felt mysterious lightning-like energy was passing from her body to Tippajji's frail frame.

Terror began to grip me. I felt that what I feared would happen in the temple, was going to happen here. I apprehended repetition of that early episode. But luckily for me, no such thing happened. Grandmother then changed her tone and manner of speech and softly said, ''I think you are frightened. What is there to fear? Such are her ways. I felt no fear. Why should you feel so? Is she not our *Amma?* Are children afraid of their mother?''

Tippajji, like one revived in spirits, said, ''You are a virtuous soul! *Amma* has revealed so many things to you.''

Just then Tippajji's daughter-in-law, who had been quietly working inside the house, came out and placed two cups of jaggery syrup before us. Granny sipped one, felt refreshed and remarked, ''Now, I feel all right; I felt a little giddy when I was narrating to you all that. It is my age that does it ; I too have grown feeble.''

''I am worse than you. I am like a wind-blown dry leaf, devoid of moisture. Anyway it was good of you to have come to see me.''

''I am younger than you.''

''True, I am older. But you are of a different mould, for Mother has blessed you.''

''You too are her child ; everything is her creation, whether it can move or not. Only it is so difficult for every one to realize this.''

''That also is a fact. But Mooki, tell me why a person like me should still hang on here. He doesn't remove me from this place.''

''Sister, why entertain such notions-like his coming and taking you away ? You will live a little longer. Nothing is wrong with you. This apparel of yours will last some more time.''

''Why ? You want me to live longer ?''

''Yes, in a manner of speaking. Suppose one is to live or has to live ; what does the place matter, here or there ? Life, they say, is indestructible It may vanish when the entire world vanishes. When that time comes, there will be no one ; not even this *Amma*, the one who stages all these plays. We live as long as she does, she as long as we live, and the world exists as long as both we and she live.''

I could not in the least understand this new language and philosophy of granny. It is surprising how she acquired all this knowledge. None of my ancestors-my father, my grandmother, or grandfather–was probably well-versed in *Vedantic* knowledge. I don't know if Tippajji, who was so intently listening to her words, could really understand her. But I could see her face light up as if she understood every word of it.

An hour past noon, the daughter-in-law of the house served us food. I was afraid ot eating here for fear of offending Manjunatha. He would be displeased I thought, but granny remarked, "It is enough if you accept *prasada* there."

"It won't be proper if I don't join the rest at the meal," I said.

"This also is a part of it. This rice is her gift too," remarked Tippajji. I accepted the food. After the meal I rushed to Manjunatha's house. I wished to be of use to him at least in serving food to the guests. It was only after I reached the place that the first batch of guests sat for food. I helped in serving food and later joined the second batch to consume food. I did not tell anybody that I had eaten earlier at Tippajji's. Sita, on finding me, enquired about granny and when I told her where she was, she felt quite relieved.

After food, I went to granny and brought her to Manjunatha's house. He was immensely pleased to see her. He and his entire family prostrated before her and sought her blessings.

I wanted to leave the place with granny and my children. Granny sought Manjunatha's permission and soon we all left. We started homewards. The distance was short, but the forest path had many carves. Now and then I had to warn granny saying, 'Slow, be careful, I am here!' etc. Extricating her hands from my grip she said, "I know the path" and then walked on. The forest path forks at a point and there I took a wrong turn to the the left. None noticed this mistake but shortly after, granny suddenly stopped at a certain place and I asked her the reason.

"Are you deaf?" she asked.

"Why?"

"Can't you hear?" she said.

"I can't hear anything."

Then, unmindful of me, she walked a few paces forward, moving out of the large granite bed to its edge and stood there looking at something with curiosity. I went near her and asked her what she was doing. She then said, "Why, I can hear quite clearly the words,

"O Indra, I bow to you.
O Varuna, I bow to you.
O Mitra, I bow to you'
Listen."

"But where? Who would be chanting hymns here? Probably the Vedic chants that you heard in the temple precincts are still haunting you," I said.

"No, you see there – someone is performing a "Yajna" (sacrifice.) A few bearded Brahmins are sitting round the sacrificial fire. They are chanting 'mantras' pouring ghee, and offering *samith*."

When I looked about searchingly, I realized I had taken the wrong turn. So, in panic, I said, "Granny, you were in the lead and you took the wrong path; I did not notice it; come back; it will get dark soon," and I led her back. I could easily see she was reluctant to come with me. I pressed her to follow me. With great difficulty I retreated my steps, came to the right point and then walked towards our house. When we came near the *aswatha katte* granny told me that she would sit there for a while and that I could go home. This I did in a hurry and informed Sita of my arrival. I then hurried to the well, washed my feet and face and performed my evening ablutions, all in a great hurry. That night we ate nothing having eaten a little too much at the temple. But something had to be offered to granny; for she did not eat in the temple. She had just taken a little sweet, as *prasada*, because of Manjunatha's insistence.

Sita asked me, "Where is your granny?"

"At the *aswatha katte*."

"You left her there! Let us give her a little snack. Let her at least eat some beaten rice and drink some buttermilk. I suppose, at Tippajji's place, there was a lot of talk."

"Oh, yes. They talked a lot as soon as we went there, and afterwards, both became silent."

"Tippajji might have remained silent; but granny is not the one to do so."

"Why do you want all that? When we reach their age, I think we shall have to be carried about in a basket."

Sita said nothing. I started towards the *aswatha katte*.

As I neared it, I could hear granny's mutterings. So I slowed my pace and proceeded softly and then sat at the extreme edge of the bund. If she was soliloquizing, I did not want to disturb her. Many a time, her musings consist of simple, clear observations. I thought that she was conversing with some invisible person and so my curiosity increased. But she was chanting :

'Oh Indra, accept this, I bow down to thee,
Oh Varuna, accept this, I bow down to thee.'

"Oh what a fate! who wants you nowadays? That age is gone. There was a time when the Brahmins held you in high esteem, you lived on them and they on you. For a few centuries you ruled over the minds of people when for every little thing they addressed you, 'Oh Indra, Oh Varuna, Oh Mitra,' they beseeched. From morning till noon they poured ghee into the sacrificial fire and offered you rice. They raised the smoke to the heavens. But those days are over. Now who wants you or your heaven ?

"Oh Agni, Lord of Fire, you are the best of the lot, for up to now the Brahmins have retained some respect for you. You never suffer from indigestion for all the ghee, *samith* and other things we offer. Manjunatha must have poured down one huge potful of ghee this day. I have my doubts if after consuming the whole lot, you will offer any of it to Indra, or Bhagavathi !

"But, you will do no such thing, I am sure. It will only fill your belly. Instead, you will send forth a lot of smoke and spread it to the winds and then say,' Well, let the gods who have a right to a share take it.' I can see through your false game. You are the most deceitful among false gods."

At these words, I felt my heart pounding. She was talking like a votary of *Charvaka*. It seemed as though she believed in no god at all. Her soliloquy continued.

"Do you remember that day ? I walked around you, holding his hands ; and paced seven little steps. You were the witness to our marriage. What did you do to me ? You consumed his life. No, that is not true. You can never get at life ; you consumed his body. The body turned to ashes. You could not fully consume him for had you done so, you would not have been able to digest it all. So you left a few pieces of bones. These my uncle took to Rameswara and offered them to Varuna.

"After Indra was eliminated from the scene, you remained behind. So far as swallowing ash is concerned, Varuna has stayed behind.

"But remember this-my Amma never suffered your fate, Indra. She is the creator of life and the protector as well. When the time comes, she will herself destroy life. She will be revered through all the ages. Because of her, the one who is called 'He' too will be respected and because of both of them people still have some respect for you."

Forgetting myself, I asked, "Who is 'he', granny?" and she replied,

"People say it is a word that a woman should not utter. But why should I feel shy? I am as much a male as a female; the phallus! the linga! The union of both these principles leads to creation. If we discount these two principles, what is left on earth?

"Even otherwise, man is a very fickle-minded animal. To him what he attains today gets stale tomorrow, be it food, drink, or an offering to god!"

"Why do you say so?"

"Why then do we men worship newer and newer gods, after once praising and worshipping gods like Indra, Varuna, and the gods of other directions? Their name is legion-Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesh, Durga, Parvati, Mookambu and so on and on. Each one in her or his turn has a thousand names."

"Yes, they recited today the one thousand names of Goddess Lalitha!" I exclaimed, like a clever chap.

"Yes, yes, we entertained hundreds and thousands of gods and gave them thousands and thousands of names. In the same way, people of different times and climes must have created many similar gods and given them different names.

"All those names would in reality mean only one Power, wouldn't they?"

"If people had commonsense why should they call Indra, Varuna, Agni and Mitra by different names and also offer them food separately? When god was conceived in terms of genders, two names came into being. Can he have sex? Being unable to guess his or its nature, we gave a thousand names, created a thousand gods. When this led to confusion, we wanted to extricate ourselves by saying, 'God is one and He plays a thousand roles.'

"All that is one? All this is one type of play, not the play of knowledge but that of ignorance."

"A play is a play. Ignorance is ignorance. Otherwise, would people kill in front of Amma's temple, sheep and goats and buffalo, all created by her ? If she was the one that filled us with life-giving blood, would she then quench her thirst by drinking it? In ancient days they used to offer human sacrifice before Amma, thinking that she liked it best. Ignorance leads to injustice...that should not happen."

The riddle that granny posed was indeed hard to resolve. Her mind moved like quicksilver. I saw nothing absurd in her arguments, but to take them in at one sweep was beyond me. In order to escape Sita's admonition, I told her, "Sita wants you to go in for a snack; she asked me to fetch you."

"Yes, I shall come. I lost all track of time in my foolish rambling thoughts. I told you that on the way I saw and heard something, that is what made my thoughts wander. It has been so the whole day, except for the little time I spent with Tippakka, and then I was extremely happy." She got up; I took her by the hand and led her home.

Granny strecthed herself after her tiffin and Sita took the children to sleep with her. But my own mind was totally confused because of the many things that I had witnessed. A vast panorama consisting of a mixture of real and unreal scenes moved and danced before my eyes, once again. Hindugana shrine, the pandal, the "homa" ceremony and the throngs of people – all came before my eyes. Amma of

Hindugana assumed terrible shapes like those of Kali, Durga and Chandi and flashed before me. Her Kali figure was such a monstrous thing – with eyes bulging, tongue stretching, a hundred arms raised and the hair lifted, and huge breasts hanging down. She stood trampling underfoot the giant Mahisasura. How could she, a goddess to be so tenderly addressed as 'Amma', change into this form? Who gave her this incredibly horrible form? I don't know why they spun a terrible legend about her.

I passed the night in such nightmares. When Sita was out of bed at daybreak, I too woke up; but I did not leave my bed. I could hear the sound of vessels being cleaned. When the eastern sky began to dazzle my eyes, I got up hurriedly, rolled my mat, and thrust it into the wall shelf. I was late in washing my face too. It was only when I began to pour down cold water over my head, pot by pot, that I felt myself coming down step by step to mother earth from the high heavens, where I had been floating about all the time.

When I resumed my daily chores, all dreams were forgotten, but still one memory held fast. That was the previous day's mistake in missing the fork on the road, taking the wrong turn and coming to a certain spot. That was a vast bed of granite layers. There must have been something strange in that area. I thought otherwise that particular place would not have caused granny to run wild with visions. I wanted to go to the spot that evening before the sun went down, and investigate.

When the evening sun had cooled down, as luckily the children were not there I thought I could slip away from home. I came out, went past the peepul tree and took the Hindugana footpath. At the fork I became alert and turned to the right.

Just a hundred yards ahead I saw the granite bed and immediately sharpened my ears and eyes. I too might hear Vedic chants. Instead, a crow pheasant cooed. This bird is called 'Bharadwaj' which is also the name of a sage of *Vedic* times. I walked upon the barren stretch of rock. Not a single plant could grow on it. When I went to one extreme edge of this rock bed, I came across a stone basin, and by its side stood a stone post. The stone post was perhaps used by load carriers, to rest their load for a while. But a stone basin in such a spot ? It was the ancient custom to put up such basins by the roadside, to provide drinking water to thirsty cattle. But where would the water for the basin come from ? A water basin meant the existence of a well in the vicinity.

With some hesitation, I went out looking for a well. For this kind of work, you need a companion by your side to boost your morale. In the jungle, amidst thickets and shrubs, to locate a well is not easy, even if it does exist. I strolled about the place and came by a hollow, overgrown with *kedige* plants. These plants do suggest the presence of water, at a fairly high level, I thought. No wonder if I had come upon them because I did want to find a well ! But how could granny have heard *Vedic* chants in this place? Could it be that once upon a time the hermitage of an ancient sage had stood here ? In that case, there might have been a fire pit in front of the hermitage. Would traces of such things still be visible after thousands of years ? I laughed at such an idea. But traces of such a hermitage would have been enough to set granny dreaming of the past. I am not that lucky. I must be content with finding the stone basin and the stone post.

In the midst of the forest growth, I found a peepul tree. It set me dreaming once again. The tree might have been planted by early sages, because they needed its twigs to offer to Agni. But the tree that I explored looked less than a hundred years old. But there was a better chance of the peepul tree near our house having been planted by some unknown ancient sage.

The existence of the screw pine grove intrigued me. I could get some labourers to clear the area and this might lead to the discovery of an old well. There was the possibility of discovering an old well somewhere near about. By then, the western sky had turned red and I could hear some voices. To be discovered in this place by a friend or an acquaintance would be an embarrassment.

Two young men along with an elderly lady came that way carrying bundles of cane. They were tired, so they stood by that stone post, eased their loads and rested a little. They settled down to a chat.

One of the young men said, "Mother, it is getting dark. How far can we go ? Since Moodoor is very near, why not stay there and spend the night ? We could drink some water, have a night's sleep and leave at daybreak."

"Child, why should we stay at Moodoor or go to anybody's house ?" the woman asked.

"My toe is sprained and I can hardly walk."

"Then, you shall not make it worse by knocking against a stone or root. All right, we shall stay at Moodoor. May be we have the luck of drinking Moodoor water."

"Where shall we stay at Moodoor ? Don't you know anybody, an acquaintance of bygone days ?"

"I know some people. Very near here, there is a Brahmin family ; they are called the Adigas of *Aswatha Katte*. We need not go to their house, but we may sleep on the stone bench there."

While she was pondering, I walked towards them. When I looked at her face, I remembered to have seen it some time, somewhere. Then the young man, her son perhaps, asked me, "Which is the Brahimin house near *aswatha katte* ?"

The woman added, "There used to be an old lady, Mookamma. Which is the way to her house ?"

I said, "That is my place ! Come along with me. What do you need ? You must be people who have gone to the *ghat* wall to bring canes. You may come, drink some water and get refreshed."

They followed me. I had told them that they could come and be refreshed. But I would look silly if I were to offer them only water and send them to rest. Could I not ask Sita to cook something for them ? When they approached our house they were overjoyed to see that old peepul tree. They put down their loads there. Then the elderly lady said, "Children, follow the master and beg of him to give you a pot of water."

I said "Why not come to the house ? Can't we give you a little *conjee* ?"

She replied, "I know that your house is a place that has fed a dozen mouths. Even so, I don't want to trouble you. What we need is some water to drink."

"You know who Mookajji is ?"

"Master, I do remember her. If that great lady is alive, she also may know who this unfortunate Nagi is..."

Impulsively I repeated words, "Who this Nagi is...." and swallowed the rest of the sentence. I assured her, "Don't in the least hesitate. The yard before the house is clean and smooth. Come, have a wash first, then some water and jaggery and a little food. If you rest after satisfying your hunger, my grandmother will be really pleased. After that you may do as you wish."

CHAPTER X

Fatigued as they were, Nagi and her boys followed me to the house without much ado. They went to the well and had a wash. In the meantime, I brought for them some jaggery and a pot of water. I had asked Sita to prepare some simple food for three persons. Nagi returned from the well and said, "Master, we have satisfied our thirst at the well. We will now go to the *katte* and sleep."

I said in surprise, "But the water and jaggery placed here have not been touched!"

Then Nagi's son remarked, "Mother, master might feel hurt if we don't take this jaggery and water," and pulled the jaggery leaf towards himself.

Then I said, "It is not proper that you should go away in hunger, having come to our house. Food is being cooked. Eat it and then go." But Nagi was hesitant and she said, "No, no, we shall not trouble the mistress of the house." I could see her face in the light of the lantern in the verandah. It reminded me of the face that I had seen about fifteen years ago. Then it had greater charm. That charm had disappeared long ago owing to advanced years but she never looked despondent. Her two children were beaming with youth.

By then, granny came out of her room and looked at them from the verandah. Probably she had heard me entreating them to stay for food.

"Is it Nagi ? Is it Nagi of our village ?" granny enquired.

Nagi's face fell. She stared at granny's face and in fear gave an answer probably because she had to say something : "Big mistress, my debts to this village were discharged long ago."

Granny looked at her, laughed and then said, "You are a brave woman, you had your way. Today you got the opportunity of visiting our house. That is because you are fated to drink the water of our well."

I don't know if Nagi felt like laughing or weeping at those words. She stood silent for a while and then said, "Master, we need no food. We will go now and sleep there on the *katte*."

Granny then admonished her gently saying, "Enough of your vanity. You will lose nothing if you eat a few morsels of food at Mookajji's place."

"Ah, when my deity ordains it..." she replied.

"Say so. I don't know why, but, you have been in my mind from my very early days. It is good you have come here today. Now let me say nothing. Wait a while. There is something I wish to tell you after you have satisfied your hunger."

I think it must have been more than twenty years since these souls had seen each other. Besides, there is no tie of blood or caste between them. "What, then has my granny to tell her?" I said to myself.

In order to while away the time granny asked, "Are they not your two children?"

"Yes, it is because of them that I have borne this life."

"So should a mother do; and the children should remember it. But how many will remember that affection?"

"They have cherished it, my mistress. To them I am their very life. If I see them grow up, marry and bring up a family, I shall be more than contented. After that I don't mind even if dogs and jackals finish me off."

Granny laughed, "Why should dogs and jackals eat you, when you have these boys?"

"I am worried about them, mistress. When I think of family-life and all that, I just don't know what is written on their forehead," said Nagi in a sorrowful tone.

"That is enough. I can guess that much; I know it all. Let your meal be over. Then I will tell you something that might comfort you.." and granny went back to her room.

At this, my curiosity was whetted. I have never seen granny talk to anyone in such a kind manner. More often than not, her bluntness hurt people.

Long long ago this miserable woman had lived here. During the time she lived here, people must have spat on her face. And granny treats such a person as if she is her grand-daughter, who has come after a long absence! That is the wonder!

I was keen to know what they would say to each other. It did not strike me as improper to eavesdrop on them. Instead, I felt that I was responsible for getting Nagi there and so indirectly it was I who had fulfilled granny's desire to talk to her.

When food was ready, Sita called them. I had food in the kitchen, talking to my children. Granny finished her tiffin and went to her own room. At the suggestion of my wife, I had given three areca *sheaths* to my guests, to serve them as plates for the food. She served them as much food as they could eat. While serving food she conversed with them too, as I could overhear a sentence or two of her remarks, "Where are you from?'' ''Oh, picking canes and cutting them is a terrible job. It must be like getting into a cage of thorns,'' remarked my wife. One of the sons said, ''Madam, in about ten days, I may come again for the canes, as monsoon seems to be slow in arriving. I will then bring you a nice rattan box. Such a box will last an age. My mother is an expert in knitting cane.''

''No, no, it is not for that I cooked food for you,'' Sita said and went away to her work. Their meals over, Nagi removed the arecanut *sheaths*, cleaned the place and washed her hands. As usual, I offered them betel leaves, nut and a bit of tobacco to chew. Then I showed them the verandah of the outhouse and said, ''There on the wall you have screwpine mats. Spread them and sleep there.'' Just then I heard my son Kittanna moan : ''Come to bed, daddy.'' I spread the children's beds and lay down by their side, and then Kittanna insisted on stories. What a nuisance! To satisfy him I had to narrate something. So I began by saying, ''Once upon a time there was a king''. Chandra protested saying, ''I don't want your king. Tell me something beautiful.'' ''Tell the story of an elephant''; he requested. I then added, ''The king had an elephant too.'' Then Kittanna asked, ''Which king had the elephant?''

By the time I finished the story somehow, my younger boy had gone to sleep and the elder one was about to do so. I had forgotten the newcomers and was very drowsy. But Sita's grumbling disturbed my sleep. She said, ''How much talk is going on ! And that with strangers too! I think they are still talking''.

''Aah,'' I yawned from my disturbed sleep. ''What did you say ?'' I asked her.

"You listen. She is engaged in endless talk with that stranger!" she bemoaned.

"Who?" I said.

"Who? Granny," she said.

That suddenly reminded me of the words that granny had exchanged with Nagi when they first met. Granny had pointedly told her she wanted very much to talk to her and tell her something that would comfort her. Telling stories to my kids, I had forgotten the entire episode and then I had fallen asleep. Now I woke up sharply. The moon was bright outside. In the verandah of the outhouse I could see two persons sleeping. "I think granny is talking to Nagi, sitting somewhere near by," I said to myself and I looked about for them. My legs carried me out of the yard. I could then make out their voices; they were coming from the *Aswatha Katte*. As I walked slowly towards the place, I heard Granny rebuke me, "Why did you come? Go and sleep. It is not proper to listen to to talk about other people's affairs,' She sounded quite harsh.

I was rightly punished for my silly act. Whatever she wanted to say to Nagi was no business of mine. Nagi would be pouring out her own miseries and granny would be listening to them. She is a poor soul. At one time her name might have been notorious. But her story need not have been a local legend-so musing to myself, I was chewing my own remorse. Like a humiliated child I returned home and stretched myself on the carpet. I don't know when exactly sleep overtook me. But when I woke up, I saw only my children sleeping by my side. Those who were sleeping in the out house verandah must have gone away before break of day. There was no trace of them or their head loads, anywhere near the place.

With great difficulty, I erased from my memory Nagi and her sons, but I could not get over the rebuke granny had administered the previous night. Why she should have carried on such a long cenversation with Nagi I could not guess.

Granny's routine was undisturbed. When the sun shone above the top of the arecanut trees, I saw her walking in the courtyard. I did not dare to talk to her, nor did she show such an inclination. I could have poured out all my misery to Sita, but was afraid to do so lest she should say, "Rightly punished!"

For no obvious reason I had myself made too much of granny. Whatever the people of my villagers might think of her, to me she was an extraordinary being. I did not know how much truth there was in her words but never did I feel that she was talking rubbish or that her mind was wandering.

After lunch in the afternoon, and a nap, I was planning something. The desire to go to the *Ghat* wall lay deep in me. The last time I went there I had taken Janna with me and I was guided by a tribesman. I could not go alone, for it was a forest path. I did not fear the tiger, boar or bison, but was afraid of losing my way in the jungle. Should I go and ask my old guide Annu Nayak to go with me, I wondered. By then, I could see clouds rolling in the sky now and then and vanishing. I thought it might rain that day or the next. The afternoon heat had been unbearable.

I heard some one who seemed to have read my thoughts say just then : "It is sure to rain within half an hour or so." "Who is it that echoes my own prediction?" I asked myself. To find out I craned my neck this way and that. I could then see Manjunatha coming from the well, after washing his face.

"Oh, it is Manjunatha. It is you who said it might rain. I also thought so" I said.

"It should be pouring in a few minutes. What terrible heat! If only it had given me two days' respite, I would have finished all my work. I have not dismantled the pandal or settled the accounts. And I have to go back to Mysore before the rains commence."

"Whatever that be, Manjunatha, I admire very much your courage and largeness of heart. You celebrated *Amma's* festival on a grand scale. I have not seen so many faces even at the festival of Kapaleswar deity. How you managed to invite them all is a wonder!" I exclaimed in appreciation.

He replied, "You are surprised at the large gathering! It was Jagadamba who attracted them. When it is a matter of the service of the Goddess, would people shirk coming?"

"Your hands were indeed generous!"

"Not mine, not mine! Her hands are such; it is the Goddess's. Through me she gave quarter of a rupee to every one who came. Because she bade me pay it, I paid it. I am overjoyed. People from Vandse and Shankaranarayana took the entire burden off my shoulders. They worked very hard indeed, and as for me, I paid them quite handsomely."

"Manjunatha, I feel that this is an age of money. If one has money one gets respect!" I remarked.

"In a way it is true; but not quite. People came in large numbers because they still believe in God, not for the sake of the little silver piece I have given as *Dakshina*."

"No, not for its sake; they would not have walked that distance just for that. By the way, when do you go to Mysore?"

"I have to go as early as possible. If only it does not rain for the next two days, I will have cleared the pandal. I have then to send back the borrowed vessels and other things. If I do that my responsibility for the year is over. But till I am able to put up a nice sanctum, a fine frontage and pavilion, my mind will have no rest.''

Sita came at that very moment to lend support to him. I know too well that Manjunatha was deeply devoted to the goddess, but with the dovotion went a good deal of conceit too. It must, however, be conceded that it requires a charitable mind to spend money that way. It was apparent that in return he desired to hear praises of his lavish ways. Probably, in order to hear them from granny, he inquired where she was. Sita said, ''She may be somewhere hereabouts.''

''I want to meet her before I go,'' he said. He looked in her room and peeped into the rear verandah. Then he remarked, 'No, she may be at the *aswatha katte* for that is her usual place.'' Even as he spoke we heard the deafening sound of thunder, followed by lightning and more thunder, as well as a hurricane. It began to blow so furiously that the arecanut palms in my garden began to sway and shiver. Palm frond mats covering the pandal and the straw thatch of the roof were lifted high and scattered in all directions. Window-shutters and door-shutters began to rattle. I rushed to the *aswatha katte* to fetch granny. My face and eyes were completely covered with dust in the storm. It was a tumultuous scene, when large rain drops began to fall with great force. Granny was coming towards me, tottering in the wind. Holding her arms I wanted to lead her into the house.

''Oh, let go my hand ; I am no child ; I wish it will rain well,'' she said.

From a near by mango tree, a huge branch broke away and fell to the ground with a thud. All the trees were swaying their heads in a giddy fashion. I could see my child Kittanna rushing out of the house, shouting to me, ''Daddy, mangoes! mangoes!'' He was running towards the trees to pick them up. I was stunned. ''You fool, get in! Mangoes will not run away from there. If a branch falls on your head, you may die!'' I scolded him. The foolish child never heeded my rebuke, so I had to leave granny and rush out to bring him back. He was madly counting and picking up the mangoes saying 'one, two, three.' I dragged him away angrily, and pushed him into the verandah. Granny went to the verandah and sat there, leaning against a wall. The sound of rain, thunder, lightning and wind grew. Manjunatha was trying to converse with granny in the turmoil. I went to a pillar and sat beside it. For almost an hour, we all sat in silence, as if struck by a devil, witnessing the fury of wind and rain. ''The rains of the entire month of Ashadha seem to be pouring down just in an hour'' we said to one another.

After some time, the rains abated and so too the winds; the skies cleared and the evening sun shone on the landscape covering it with a golden hue.

Manjunatha sat quietly facing granny. From her mouth escaped the words, ''Of what avail is human vanity before nature's power?'' I don't know if it was meant to be a snub to Manjunatha's vanity. But he said nothing. Probably he was thinking of the vast damage the pandal put up at the temple would have suffered in the hurricane. He got up in a hurry and said, ''Let me run home. I don't know what catastrophe has befallen there. I can imagine it. The winds must have torn the entire covering, and scattered the pieces far and wide. Even the roof of the house might have been blown off.''

"Quite true! Let me go and see the mischief it must have done in my garden!" I said and rushed to look. My children had not forgotten the mangoes. They cried, "Mother, mangoes." She went out with a basket to the mango tree and I to my garden. In the garden I saw that a number of arecanut trees were lying flat on the earth. Quite a number of plantain trees had been felled, too.

The hilarity of my children had to be seen to be believed. My wife had brought in four baskets load of mangoes and spread them on the floor. There were ripe ones, half ripe ones, tender ones, and very tiny ones, all mixed. Nothing was left on the tree.

"Why did you bring everything?" I asked her.

"What is the use of letting them lie there? We can slice them and dry them in the sun, or bake them and prepare mango-cake," she said. I like mango cake very much and so I had to appreciate her forethought.

There was still an hour for the sun to set; so I wanted to take a stroll in the village, in order to guage the havoc caused by the thunderstorm. The first person I met on the way was Oil-monger Ramanna carrying the oil pot on his head. His clothes were wet and he must have had a fine drenching. I don't know if the pot he carried had any oil. I said, "Where were you when the rains came? Terrible rains!"

"Terrible indeed, I haven't seen the like of it since I was born! Half a pot of oil was ruined by the rains.

"When the rain was about to break out I was in the neighbouring scrub jungle. I hurried. But the broken branch of a tree fell and hit the oil pot I was carrying. The pot fell and the oil got mixed with the water. So I ran to the front facade of the temple. It is supposed to have a roof. But nothing helped. Rain and spray both drenched me continuously. The rain never showed any mercy either to the temple or to its facade. I closed my eyes, too frightened to watch the havoc. Then a devastating lightning struck. What a nerve-shattering sound it made! It looked as if it struck close to me, barely three yards away!

"I don't know where the lightning really struck. I was confident that it would not strike the temple facade and it did not. But the roof of the music pavilion was blown off by the winds. Its roof and tiles have been blown to bits.

"Have you seen the racing waters? The *Okuli* pit is filled with red water. Today it really has the colour of '*Okuli*' water. When the rains abated, I left the place. Half a pot of oil is lost and lost for ever.

"You remember the stone pavilion at the point where one enters the paddy fields? That has fallen flat. Who knows how ancient that is? It might have been felled by the wind itself. If, instead of rushing to the temple, I had sought shelter in it, I would have been crushed to death. The fact would have been known only when my frail body had begun to rot and stink."

I was absorbed in listening to Ramanna's vivid description of the happenings of that evening. I was curious to survey the scene. When he saw me move out he asked me, "Where are you going?"

"To the paddy fields, to see what has happened," I replied.

"Very well, go if you are so keen" he said and went his way. Leaving him, I turned in the direction of the fields. True to Ramanna's account the whole area was under kneedeep water and the brook was overflowing. The frogs were croaking from all corners.

First I went to Janardhana's house to find out if he had returned home and also to see what the rains had done. I could see there too that the fury of the rains had wrought the same destruction, but the havoc caused by the winds was mild. Janna's mother was busy sweeping the debris in the yard and she was muttering, "What rain, what rain! A month's rain in just a moment." I learnt from her that she knew nothing about Janna's whereabouts. I gave her the news that I had gathered from Ramanna. And then I walked home.

I could not have missed the sight of the *aswatha katte* while going that way. The storm had plucked all the tender leaves of the tree and strewn them on the ground. The *katte* reminded me of granny, who, of course, was sitting there. She had moved to the stone steps leading to the *katte*. Some one was sitting before her at a little distance. I did not have the courage to go near them or even glance at them; so I walked a little distance along the footpath and proceeded home. Even without my wishing to hear what they were saying, a few words reached my ears: "You listen to me. Think that like King Nala you too were cursed by Saturn. Your sister passed away; you say your younger sister has left you, too. Who will look after you? You owe no responsibility to any one. Believe that God gave you back the life that you had once lost."

I came home. I could not make sense of the sentences I had heard, nor could I recognise the person to whom they were addressed. I knew that though many persons in the village considered granny insane, there were a few who sought her advice on important matters. One of them must have been listening to her.

After a little while, granny came home alone. Finding Sita also alone, I said : "Sita, a good deal of damage has been done to the temple, it seems. I was told that the music pavilion had collapsed. The old stone pavilion in the middle of the village has also come down ; also, our paddy fields seem to be in knee-deep water as if there were floods."

"Did all that happen because it rained just once ?" she wondered.

"In a way, this rain was badly needed. However, no one has ploughed his fields or raised seedlings. But the way it struck with no warning is strange."

"You mean to say that all these years the monsoon used to give proper notice and only this year it came down suddenly like an uninvited guest ?" said Sita by way of a joke.

"Who are those uninvited guests ?" came the querry from granny.

"It was I who said it for fun when he referred to the rain having come without any hint," said Sita.

"Oh, that ! That is how it rains in this part of the year. Today the gust was more violent, that's all. What is there strange in it ? I know why it rained like this. It was to punish Manjunatha. True, he has done a fine thing but he was strutting about like a cock of the walk. The furious rains were the right punishment. Did you not see him run home, utterly humiliated ?"

Sita did not relish granny's remarks. It is such rebukes that make her feel that granny's tongue is unrestrained. Why should we not take such remarks as jokes ? I wanted to know who was engaged in conversation with granny and I said to her ''Granny, the heavy rains completely drenched the *katte* and made it cold, but you did not miss your routine.''

''That is my place.''

''Yes, but who the devil was it who came to talk to you at that hour ?''

''It was no devil but just a human being. In joy or in sorrow, a human being has the need to converse with another human being'' granny replied.

I was abashed. She did not tell me who the person was, and I did not dare ask her directly, lest it should provoke a rebuke.

CHAPTER XI

What Manjunatha's fate was, I could not guess, but my own was pathetic enough. The whole of the next day I spent in dismantling my pandal, gathering its palm frond mats and drying them in the sun. Then the garden had to be cleared and this took one more day. I think Manjunatha must have faced ten times the havoc and the labour. Though granny had remarked that this fate had befallen Manjunatha by way of punishment because of his vanity, I still felt pity for him and went to his place after completing my own work. Fortunately for him, the new thatched roof of the temple had stood the gale well. Only the large pandal in front of it was torn to bits. He had a hard time gathering the materials, drying them and stacking them properly. He had already dismantled the other pandal that had been put up in front of his house. It all meant a great deal of labour. But getting labourers would not be a problem for him. With his money he could command labour and he was not at all tight-fisted.

When I went to his house, he was not at home, but his wife Sridevi received me and gave me coffee and we had an enjoyable conversation. Before giving coffee, she had described the havoc wrought by the storm and the rains. In the middle of the conversation she put in a complaint too. "Your granny seems to have criticized my husband saying that he was bursting with vanity. How has he displayed vanity?" she said.

"I don't think she made any such remark," I said.

"Did he not call on you on that rainy day? Watching the storm and rain on that day she told him so to his face. Was it out of vanity that he performed the service to *Amma*?" she asked.

Indeed, I too had felt very much the sting of granny's remark that day. But I could not let her down. I said, "She must have made a casual remark, without intending to offend any one in particular. Don't we say that God is angry, when rains fail?" But obviously this did not pacify Sridevi.

She said, "I think your granny talks too much. She blurts out something, without pausing to choose her words. My husband invited her to the festival with so much regard for her. She came here but she did not even care to take God's 'prasada.' Instead, she dined at Tippajji's place. Was that right?"

It was I who took her to Tippajji because she had wished it. Granny does not like to eat in a crowd. By nature, she comments on people who come near her, both strangers and friends. In order to avoid such situations I took her to Tippajji's place. They are friends, and besides, Tippajji is blind. Because that elderly lady had pressed us to have food, we dined there. Even then, when I returned, I ate here as God's prasada, and she also ate a little sweet. I never thought that such a small incident would gain such prominence.

"Sridevamma, at her age, I cannot curb granny's ways or words. Every one knows her temperament. She never stirs out of the house, but this time she did so to please Manjunatha, I know. In her crazy way she always does something or says something which must be forgiven and forgotten. So please do so."

I was not sure whether my words had any soothing effect on her. I retreated from the house, quite unhappy. That was obviously not my lucky day. I set out for home, while my mind roamed ; all of a sudden I found myself on the granite bed that lay by the forest path. I stopped and listened ; and strangely enough the chant, ''Indra I bow to thee, accept this'' reached my ears. I laughed and pricked up my ears. I heard the following verses. It took full ten minutes for me to get rid of the illusion of hearing the Vedic verses chanted. But I was intrigued very much with the experience. I felt this place had a mystery of its own ; something of ancient days haunted it. I felt I had no choice and had to visit the place once again and that for a closer inspection, I should take granny round about the place and to that low-lying swampy bit. I walked towards that low land which was heavily overgrown with screw pines. It was likely in ancient days there had been a well there. The granite water basin strongly suggested the presence of a nearby well.

Could there not have been something more than a mere well, I wondered. Just then I heard the rustling of the dried leaves covering the ground, as if something was moving. I stared intently and saw a yellow cobra gliding. The screw pine plants often attract the cobra. There might also have been a *'bana'* here, a place where the serpent god was worshipped, I thought.

If I wished to investigate more closely I would have to get the undergrowth cleared over a small area. But I decided not to mention the serpent to any one ; if I did no one would dare to agree to work there. The next moment, my mind linked the cobra with a hidden treasure ! I had long ago heard that under the stone pavilion in our village lies buried great treasure.

May there not be buried treasure here? There were ancient kings, who ruled here like the ones in Gersoppa, and like that place this too must have been a city. Everywhere there are ruined temples. There must have been a hundred temples, and so there may have been some thirty thousand dwellings. Any way I felt assured that my village was at one time a great city. Then, Hindgana temple would be more famous than the one at Kollur now. If only I came across some buried treasure! Plenty of gold and silver! I would then offer *Amma* of Hindgana a worship on a grander scale than Manjunatha. So dreaming, I returned to the granite bed. On its edge stood the stone post. A few days back, Nagi and her two sons had stood there in the evening heat, wiping the perspiration from their bodies. Nagi appeared before me once again with a headload of canes, but I missed her sons. Instead, there were two other Nagis. One of them was exactly the same charming young figure that I had met in the local festival fifteen years earlier. The other was a person who, by sheer toil, managed somehow to live and eked out an existence.

Memory then brought to my mind, the picture of Nagi conversing with granny. That in turn made me remember granny's rebuke to me for attempting to overhear them. Then I thought of the day when Ramanna carried on a long conversation with granny. After all, this Nagi was his beloved wife, though later on, her people cast her out for her immoral ways. Regardless of everything, Ramanna still loved her. I remembered the little incident of Ramanna losing his betelnut case in our house and then running back to get it. He never forgot his wife and he cherished this little case as a memento of his love for her. At least on learning that the poor girl led an immoral life he could have forgotten her existence. But the fact is, he never thought of another woman. I did pity poor Ramanna.

Granny would say, 'Great is the attraction of the male and the female.' That is why ancient legends narrate stories of Gods like Vishnu and Laxmi, Siva and Parvathi, being born again and again, but always cherishing the desire to be wedded to the same husband or wife. In each *avatar* the same Vishnu was the husband and the same Laxmi the wife. They married, suffered together and then cast away their bodies. Laxmi was born as Sita, in Janaka's home and Vishnu was born as Dasaratha's son Rama. He married Sita. Ravana stole her, but in the end Ravana was slain and Rama and Sita were united. But can other human beings attain this type of union?

When these thoughts came, I felt like laughing, for my wife's name is also 'Sita.' Was it possible Sita had chased me as a wife in her and my past life? Past lives? Quite likely, she would have done it, dominating me a bit, but yet running my house well. I should ask granny about it. She might know about our past lives too. If there is any such possibility I would like Ramanna to get his Nagi in a future life, if he cannot have her in this life. I hope that God will bestow the same Nagi on him.

What! Give back the same Nagi to him? That Nagi who deserted such a loving husband? Of course, now she is pathetic. But, she is polluted. That is why so much legendary lore came to my mind. The Ramayana story flashed before me. But the same Ramayana gives you the episode of Ahalya. What did Ahalya do? Willingly or unwillingly, Ahalya was a victim of Indra's appetite. But Sage Gautama cursed her. She became a stone, and remained a stone till Rama restored her to life. She then became a woman once again. But what became of her? Did she go back to her husband? That part of the story is not quite clear. Even otherwise, where could she go but to Gautama? This Nagi has suffered as much as Ahalya suffered in her life. I am sure she will go to Ramanna in her next life. She deserves it too. Now what does all this lead to? In the next life, will Ramanna be born as an oilmonger? Or Nagi as Nagi?

With this, my thoughts turned towards myself and my Sita. We are husband and wife in this life. Will we be so in our next life? Even if that should happen, we shall not know it at all. But apart from that there is one fundamental question. There are so many married couples in this world. If given the choice, would they like to be united in marriage in their next birth also? Which husband would desire to have the same woman as his next wife and which woman the same man as her next husband? As one would have suffered enough misery in life, it is quite likely that each would hope for a better husband or a better wife. I might hope for a wife much better than my present Sita, and she for a husband more active than I. Well, who knows? When such thoughts began to flood my mind, I thought, let only Gods enjoy rebirth. That is, let only a Rama and Sita have that luxury and let it not be you or me. If I am to apply that logic to Ramanna's instance, however bad Nagi may be, let her be his wife only in this life. Since they love each other so much, it is only right that they should be united now. If not, what happens in another life would not matter in the least.

With these thoughts whirling in my mind for a long time, I had not noticed the sun beating harshly on my forehead. I looked up, the sun was high up in the sky. I had not told anyone when I left home and since it was lunch time I knew I was in for a scolding from Sita. So I hurried back home. I went to the well for a wash. I could hear someone, perhaps Sita, saying, "Where have you been, Your Highness?" And I replied, "I am coming, I am coming," and straight went to the kitchen. I spent very little time over lunch, though I had entered the kitchen late. From there I came out and took a mat and pillow, wishing to lie down. When sleep came, *Naga*, Nagi, Ramanna and all appeared, but not the treasure. After waking up, I was thinking of a way to kill time when Sita accosted me with the words: "Have you sounded any one about ploughing the fields? Not likely. We have had good rains luckily and it will be easy to finish that work."

I pacified Sita by saying, "I have asked Venka. He has promised to come. In a day or two he will finish the job. There is no reason for hurry. Don't you see?"

"Yes, only I am naturally stupid and can't see such things. All of you are sharp."

After her curt retort, I was forced to ask myself the question. "Do you want the same wife again in your next life?"

But after two hours, when the very same Sita prepared nice sweet rice halva for me and my children, I conceded that if the Gods felt pleased to bestow on me in my next life the very same Sita I would not mind. Of course, that would entail her being born eight or ten years after my own rebirth. We must also be born in the same caste but should be of different *gotras*. Then our horoscopes too should agree - in that case, I would give my consent to the marriage.

In the evenings, to spend time, I generally go to Janna's house if he has come for the holidays. But this time his mother and father knew nothing of his plans. In that one respect I began to pity myself for having chosen to stay in Moodoor for life after my education. In a way Narayana was more sensible than I. The wife he had secured was an educated girl. Of course, I don't belittle Sita. She too had acquired some elementary education when young. Returning to Narayana, even before marriage he used to spend half his vacation in the town of Shimoga. Shimoga is not like our Moodoor. There, if you chance to step on the threshold, you are bound to meet someone to talk to. Not so in Moodoor. But I am so keen on visualising it as a great city that I am trying to find things to support me. I wish that I too were gifted with extra–sensory perception. But until now I have had to lean solely on granny's insights. Some have remarked that her mouth is unbridled; some have said she is tongue-tied. In her youth she had completely gone "off the rails," so people generally think. But I have deep faith in her insight. So by planting that third eye of hers on my forehead, I want to enjoy wonderful dreams of the past.

Ramanna had given me the news about the stone pavilion collapsing in Nadoor portion of the scrub jungle. He had told me that the roof of the music hall had been blown off. Further news was that the *'Okuli pit'* was full of rainwater. With these three bits of news, I had been lethargic without caring to go or investigate. So, after ascertaining that my young sons were not in sight, I set out in a hurry. I took the footpath among the scrub jungles that leads to the pavilion. The path was covered with a lot of broken twigs, branches and leaves. Every square foot of land bore witness to the gale that had blown a few days earlier. Who could say there ever stood a pavilion there ? I saw a large raised foundation with steps on all sides. Beyond this it was impossible to recapture what type of a structure stood there. On the foundation lay a jumbled mass ot slabs, stones, earth and broken branches and leaves of trees. On its four sides, there were rows of tall granite pillars. Within the seven foot-wide verandah a portion of the wall was visible. There was a a doorway too. I remembered that it had a single door leading to a small sanctum. There used to be a flat roof of granite slabs covering the entire structure. The whole structure bore a depressing appearance. In fact, I or others had never cared to ascertain what this structure really was. Moodoor, Nadoor and Padoor have a number of such ruins in their jungles. When I was younger, I had investigated a few such temple ruins. Not one contained any idol worth mentioning. This has always been called a '*mantapa*', that is, a pavilion and never a temple. Now the configuration of the whole structure seemed to have changed. The entire roof had collapsed along with the massive central granite ceiling, and the rows of pillars that stood on its four sides had been pushed out of their positions. The rain could not by itself have caused all this havoc. It was quite evident that branches of a huge copal tree fell on the stone roof, and its weight had brought everything down to the earth !

Sunlight was brightly playing over the curse-ridden stone slabs and pillars. I examined each fallen slab and broken pillar. Some stones had carvings too. There was utter ruin and disorder. I touched the things, gazed at them and tried to guess what they were and why they stood there ! Why they should have built this structure at all was beyond my guess. But a bright idea struck me just then. This place might have some hidden treasure. Why not?

I picked up a stick lying near by and began to dig the floor, where the ceiling slabs had torn the earth asunder and the ground had been broken by the impact of the fallen roof. I went on piercing the clods of earth blindly but to my surprise one clod gave out a metallic sound. On further probing, it broke down to yield a few old copper coins! Greedily, I hoped for gold instead of cheap copper. In my younger days there was a rumour that some people really had unearthed buried treasures in this jungle. So casting away fear or shyness, I took the stick and went on digging the wet floor. Among these clods of earth I found a large bit that I thought really contained something valuable. I began to remove the wet earth with my fingers and finally uncovered a bronze icon! It was eight to ten inches long and was quite heavy. I looked round, saw a puddle of rain water and washed it there. The icon was indeed an elegant figure of a man, devoid of ornaments. It resembled none of our Hindu icons. It was a nude figure and so could be a Jain icon. Whether it was a Jain icon or a Buddhist figure, nudity in gods did not appeal to me. When I saw that icon, I remembered a tale narrated by Tippajji. Which tale? That of Kotala devi. By now I had fully ascertained that the Hindugana goddess had an alias 'Kotala Devi.' I had guessed that the term Kotala must be related to the word 'kotale' which meant chicken pox But one day I discovered from a dictionary that kotala, kotari, kotavi all meant a nude woman or Goddess Durga. It was then that the story told by Tippajji about my granny's early life enlightened me further and had astonished me. That day granny would not have behaved in that manner, if in her mind she had not conceived of 'Amma' as a nude person. That was why she discarded her clothes. I thought that nudity was not a Hindu form of representation, but a Jain one. In that case, the stone building that stood here was a 'basadi' or Jain temple. I then thought that I should talk to granny and seek further enlightenment from her.

My curiosity did not subside. I began to look about that area, under trees and amidst bushes in search of more clues. In the very direction where I had inferred the door of the pavilion to have stood, I discovered a half-buried stone pillar. Around it were spread a few half buried stone slabs. At one point lay the broken idol of a female deity. It looked like that of Durga, or Laxmi of my Hindu legend. Since the stone pieces lying about there looked quite heavy, I did not try to move them. I was content to carry home the bronze icon. All this search resulted in my reaching home after dusk. I did not want Sita to see me and ask all sorts of inconvenient questions like, 'Where did you find this nude icon ?' I wanted to take the icon, and place it in granny's palms and listen to her comments. But I thought it wise to hide it in the earth till an opportune day. So I buried it under a shrub.

My next trip was to the temple site to survey the fallen top of the music pavilion, the *okuli* pit and the surroundings. The distance was only half-a-mile. I have told you almost nothing about this temple. It is a fairly big temple, apsidal-shaped, covered with a copper sheet roof. It consists of a sanctum sanctorum, a circumambulatory path and an adjoining audience hall. In front of it stands a huge pavilion, probably built later. The temple has an upper part which has four front supports made of wood. On these are fine carvings. But for the semi-circular shape at the back, the structure could be likened to a Nepali temple. Metaphorically I can compare it to the trunk and head of an elephant resting on all its four legs, of course, minus the proboscis. The idol in the sanctum is a 'linga' which we call 'Kapaleswara.' What that means I am not sure. I had heard that in earlier centuries members of a peculiar cult named the 'Kapalis' flourished in our region. For me it is a simple plain Siva temple symbolized by the 'linga' screwed to its pedestal. Beside it is a small bronze idol which is meant to be taken out on festive occasions. On such occasions, it is decorated with a large halo-like red silk pillow at its back. The whole thing is carried around the temple and even some distance from the temple, on the seven festival days of the year.

During the annual Jatra, a lot of people gather. For these seven days, a tiny market springs up here bringing a lot of trade. My most enduring memory of this Jatra is a small event - a friend pointing out to me Nagi and her two sons. You know what happened after that. Later on, I joined the college and stopped going to the festivals. But after I became a householder married to Sita, and became a father, I have been paying this temple an annual visit. But granny has not been there for many years.

As I walked towards the temple, I remembered the days when Narayana and I were boys. We grew up almost as twins, always going to school together. We both used to go to the temple during the entire week of festivities and we spent most of our time there, returning home only for food and sleep. During my boyhood itself the old ceremony of pulling the festival car had been given up. But during granny's childhood, it had been a major event. The huge car which they used to draw became too old and dilapidated and was consigned to a corner; there all its parts crumbled and rotted in rain and sun. Later, the shed in which it once stood also collapsed and the whole thing has become a mere rotten mound. It was like a tomb erected over the glory of God Kapaleswara. Well, most of the ancient glories of such ideals as dharma, gods and wealth end that way after centuries of existence.

When I reached the temple, the first thing to catch my eye was the'okuli pond'. It is customary in temples, towards the end of the annual festival, to take the 'image' for a bath- usually to a river if it is near. We have no such river though we have a tiny brook that can never be relied upon for water during summer. So we have the 'okuli pond'. It is an artificial pond, octagonal in shape, and built of stone. People carry water on their heads from distant sources and fill the pond. Of course, the 'god' is not bathed here, because the water is brought by the lower communities and so it is considered polluted. It is called 'okuli pond.' Okuli water is coloured water, which gets its red tinge because of the addition of turmeric and lime. Lord Krishna is supposed to have loved to sport with such coloured water. Here the water is not even coloured. Above this pond they erect a pulley and hang from it a huge bunch of plantains and pull it up and down. A group of people are invited to jump at the fruits. When the string is pulled the fruits dangle at various heights. The sport is to jump and catch a fruit. Whether you get it or lose it, every time you jump you fall into the water with a big splash.

A particular community of our village is formally invited to participate in the okuli sport. They come in great pomp in a procession, wtih a band playing. They usually shout the words, "Houndarayana Olagavo." This at one time probably meant "The court of the King of the Oceans." May be, at one time, the invitation was extended to an ancient king named Houndaraya to come and enjoy this sport, and in response to this invitation of Kapaleswara, this group came and participated in the sport. Somehow it looks thoroughly incongruous for this particular event to be associated with God Kapaleswara, who has his abode in the cremation ground. The original sportlike festival was probably in honour of some other deity; and the followers of Siva blindly copied it. I myself have not given much thought to this festival, nor have my village elders done any better.

As children, we enjoyed watching people jumping at the plantain bunch and getting a good ducking. We were keen to see who would be lucky enough to get the bunch of plantains. Today, I would say "What is there to see in it!" But I felt sorry about the roofless music pavilion that stood by this *okuli* pond. On festival days, the icon of the god is placed in the centre of the pavilion and it is believed that the deity enjoys the scene. That the wretched wind should not have spared God's own pavilion was a sad thought. When I returned home, my boy Kittanna accosted me and asked me where I had been.

"To the temple," I replied.

"Why did you not take me?"

"The fair is already over."

"Then why did you go?"

"I heard that the music pavilion had collapsed."

"Why did it? Who pulled it down?"

"The wind and the rain that raged a few days back."

"Then there won't be '*okuli* play' next year?"

Listening to these words, I remembered again the days of my own childhood. I, who had felt so miserable on hearing how the tradition of 'car festival' had ended, had to pacify my child. "If it falls down, won't some one rebuild it soon? Even if it is not there, the *okuli* pond is still there," I said and went to the well. I felt sorry for not having returned by the stone pavilion route, where I had hidden the bronze icon. I should not have forgotten it ; I should have brought it home along with me, I thought.

CHAPTER XII

Next day at dusk I found granny muttering something to herself. I thought it was a good time to chat with her. I have observed very clearly one thing in her ; whenever she is tired or bored, she streches and relaxes. When she is sitting, all her mental faculties are alert. At that time, her mind usually roams over many lands, her eyes are open, brows knit and lips quivering, and often sounds escape from her lips.

Granny is now in the last stage of her journey and I have discovered she wants nothing for herself. She never seeks anything from any one, not even from God. When fate took the life of her young husband, she may have cursed it like any others. She may have cursed herself for having been born a woman. But after I grew up, I have heard no expression of any such regret. Of course, by the time I came to know her intimately, the afternoon of her life had already passed. I have rarely found her utter the words 'God,' 'fate' and 'Paramatma'. Even when such words escape from her mouth by sheer force of habit, I do not think she means by them what we usually do. She would then be probably referring to some idea beyond our comprehension. And before idols she has never been supplicatory or proud.

Her mutterings are in a way her method of thinking aloud. When I approached her she was expressing her thoughts aloud; so I waited for a time. I had thought of asking her two questions. After a little while, she turned towards me and asked. ''Is it my child?'' I replied ''Yes, I came to ask you something. Are you free?''

''What is there for me to do and where can I go? Even He has not called me nor have I cared to move from here.''

''Granny, I want to consult you about something.''

''What is it?''

''In the Ramayana there are Rama and Sita, in the Bhagavatha there are Krishna and Sathyabhama and in the legends Shiva and Parvathi. These deities are supposed to take birth on the earth as incarnations in order to protect the weak and punish the wicked.''

''Yes, the Ramayana and the Bhagavatha tell us so. These things could also be the proverbial '*brinjals*'. Do you know why I think so? God is supposed to be omnipresent; would it be necessary for Him to be born in order to sweep away the accumulated dust and dirt? Not exactly dust and dirt but say - wicked demons like a Ravana or a Hiranyakasipu. Why should God take the trouble of being born as an earthly being, when He could kill instantly anyone He chooses by hurling a thunderbolt? We can consider our lives also to be 'avataras' or incarnations, for that matter. Insects, birds, animals-all these are incarnations!''

''You know why I put this question? Vishnu and Laxmi were born on the earth as Rama and Sita. Here on the earth they became husband and wife once again. I have my doubts - if Sita and I die, would it be possible for us to be husband and wife again in our next lives? If it is possible for the souls of gods to attain such things, why not for our souls?''

''Who knows what happens to us after we die? I for one don't know. I don't know if I existed before I was born or will exist hereafter. Of course, people say that the soul has to pass through many lives. That does not make sense to me. Think of God now-He is one complete thing, not a half, quarter or a tiny piece. A whole cannot be born as a piece-a story may say so, but it just can't happen. We want some faith to sustain us in this miserable existence of ours. We desire that the wicked should die and the good survive. So we create a hundred and one gods and make them take a thousand and one births. We created gods like Indra and Varuna ; later, we fancied deities like Amma, Durgi, Kottala, Kali and Chandi and then forgot the old ones. We worshipped them, made much of them. One day we shall forget them too. Probably our ancestors bestowed upon these gods brief lives because their lives too were brief. That is why today we have no living gods like Indra, Varuna and Mitra.''

''So you say there is no rebirth.''

''There are those who say there is rebirth ; and there are those who say no. One thing seems certain to me. If there are heaven and earth, there is no need for rebirth.''

''But do you believe in heaven and hell, Yama and his accountant Chitragupta ?''

''When children want to go out in the dark don't we terrify them with the mention of a 'gumma' (something like a ghost) ? Have you seen one or have I ? But you yourself threaten your child Kittanna when he is stubborn, by posing as a 'gumma' before him. I even frightened you about one when as a child you were obstinate. Would that mean that such fantasies are real ? Why do these doubts come to you ? I have no dread of death. Nothing will happen to me after death. Why do you have the fear of death now ?''

''I didn't ask this question out of fear. If death comes, it comes and none of us can stop it. We took nobody's permission to be born ; nor will we take any one's permission when we leave this place. I asked the question because I remembered the day Nagi came to rest in our house. The sight of her moved me to pity. True, at one time she did wrong. But did Ramanna never do anything wrong? Anyway he never forgot her gift of the betelnut case. I thought it would be a nice thing if at least in their next birth they were united as husband and wife, as Rama and Sita were in the Ramayana story......So this thought lingered in my mind."

"Oh ! That was the reason ! If they have to live as husband and wife once again better they do so in this very life. Even if there is going to be a rebirth, who knows where she will be born and where he will be born ? She may be born as a crow and he as a sparrow or it may be the other way."

I laughed. I could see the echo of my own trend of thoughts in hers. But she did not say anything more on the subject. Next I wished to ask her about the bronze icon I had acquired from the stone pavilion. I had brought it home and I now presented it to her wrapped in an old cloth. "Granny, please look at this," I said. She held it in her hands and was silent for a few minutes. I gave details about the piece—where, when and how I happened to get it.

"It is heavy, it must be some bronze icon," she said, feeling the bundle in her palm. Then she said, "This too is a god, but not your god, but one type of god ; may be a deity or a sage or some such great person. This has received a great deal of worship for at least two consecutive centuries. Many a hand has touched this. One such hand was utterly wicked. I can sense it from the warmth I feel in my body. Wicked, I said ; yes, wicked is the only term I can think of. It is utter wickedness, utter intolerance that brought this icon to that place. Just as they discarded Indra and installed Surya, they discarded Surya and then installed Vishnu, and once again, replaced him with Narayana in our legends–this too is a tale of continuous ouster of deity after deity. At one time, this was an icon of Vishnu or Janardhana. The people took it, melted it and cast this nude figure and installed it there–in the very place where the Vishnu figure had once stood. I think originally this was a Vishnu riding Garuda......There were many changes in that place, I am sure. You said you got this in the stone pavilion ? Then originally it was a Vishnu temple, then a Jain shrine, much later it became the stone pavilion you speak of.'' Suddenly she became silent. Darkness had set in ; I could not observe the changes in her facial expression as she sat reflecting. She must have seen so many things. She then continued—

''A lot of bloodshed occurred in this place. People fought regular battles in this area, with sword and spear. A devotee of the icon, a minor ruler, only a feudal chief, came and surrounded this area, looted it, and won it for himself. He belonged to one community, and worshipped one deity and the local people belonged to a different community and worsihpped their own god. In ten years' time, out of fear, the conquered people became tame as cattle, the chieftain's power grew and his domain expanded. People from his native place came and settled here in hundreds. They thrived and became landlords while the local people became their tenants and serfs. And, as usual, people towed the line of their new overlords. The native chieftain changed his religion to please his master, and even gave his daughrer in marriage to him, in order to win his grace. Many others followed him. There was no revolt. But the hearts of the natives began to burn when the newcomers hurled vulgar abuses at their native gods such as Siva and Amba. Even Brahmins referred to the 'linga' in vulgar words. Eventually, some native people too began to use abusive language about their native gods. Quite a large number of natives finally gave up their religion and embraced that of the victor. This icon took shape in such an epoch.

"But later, these so-called victors too suffered a similar fate. Man is not eternal and so his gods also cannot be.

"After some time, the king who installed this image died. During his grandson's time, the power was seized by foreigners and they ruled this land. So, the members of the former chief's court and others who had come and had settled there during the preceding few decades had to leave. The new converts, who had changed their religion to please their overlords, went back to their former religion. I now see a different tribe of people coming in large numbers-a strange people, their bodies smeared with ash, with bowl in hand. They look like mendicants. They look uncouth, with ash on the forehead and *rudrakshi* around the neck. They were not tyrants. They swarmed round the goddess of Hindugana. I see them sitting round a huge fire. All day long they sleep and at nights they meditate. Many of the local people come to see them. I think, the icon you gave me was buried deep in the pavilion there by someone belonging to this very sect, because he wished it to be lost to future generations. Thereafter the place became an abode of bats. If someone had found this icon during that period, I am sure it would have been melted and recast as a kitchen cauldron. As time passed, a thick jungle grew and covered the entire area.

"My boy, I have seen so many of the ruined temples strewn about this village If I chance to go and sit in any such place, this is the type of vision I experience."

"That means?"

"No temple is permanent; no god is permanent. Even if there is an ever-lasting god, we can never fathom his nature. After having created numerous gods that mirror our limited intelligence, like fools some say 'This is truth,' 'That is truth.' These very fools, whenever they meet with calamities, rush to those gods and beg them to 'do this for me and do that.' What else can they do but beg? They have suffered enough in this world and should have some hope to feed on.If they get such satisfaction they will say, 'God gave me this.' It really means that the 'Paramatma' or the Supreme Soul was highly pleased with their devotion and rewarded them. Suppose no such thing happens; then they simply say: 'It did not appeal to Him; so God did not fulfil my desire.' Since we created this 'Paramatma' and began to worship Him we have not given Him a single day's respite. We have begged of Him ever so many things continuously. Some sensible people like the sages did not do such things. But they threw upon Him the burden of punishing the wicked and protecting the weak. What does that mean?"

"You mean that begging even of a god is wrong?" I asked.

"I feel so. It would be a nice thing if we did not beg of any one. We are not children. Children plead with their mother, 'Mummy, I feel hungry, please give me something to eat.' If we were children we also could have asked things of God.

"We are born with legs, arms, eyes, a nose and a mouth. Why do we have them at all? Should we still pray to God for a tiger's mouth that we may bite and an elephant's body to carry things? How is it ever possible for God to fulfil so many wishes? If every one desires everything he sees, who should give it and why? If it is 'He' who has created us, why not think that He has provided us the wherewithal to exist? This begging business is ugly. There are millions and billions of living things like birds and insects. Do you see them ever begging? Do they even beg for food? Even when a tiger appears before a doe, the doe does not seek God's help. Should man who has intelligence not have at least as much self-respect as these creatures?

"I fully agree with you, granny. But there is one small point... You know the many tales about saints and devotees. We shall ignore the story of a sage like Narada who was a mythical person. But what of a saint like Purandhara, who lived in fairly recent times? He yearned for 'Ranga' so deeply. He never begged for food, clothes and comfort. His was a life of renunciation. What did he ask of his God? 'Oh Vittala, call me to your presence."

"Yes, yes, like a baby asking its mother to lift it up! In a way it is like saying that the mother has nothing else to do. If God is the one who has to lift you up, I think He will know when to do it. I am here for the very reason that none has called me so far; you also are here for the same reason."

"Granny, there is something else mixed up with this idea. The belief that '*samsara*' is all sorrow, that it is a type of bondage. The saints wanted God alone, nothing else! The very thought of the human body was revolting to them. Those saints likened our physical body to a bag with nine holes! What do you say to that?"

Granny laughed at my words. She said jokingly, "If your saints were disgusted with the nine orifices of their bodies, if they were so disgusted at the sight of excreta they could as well pray, 'Oh God, in my next life give me a closed physical body, stitching up all its holes!" I don't understand what they mean by leaving the earth and staying up with God. Don't we say God is omnipresent? An omnipresent God lives in the world, in 'samsara' and in us as well. He lives in one's family, one's wife and children, too. So there is no meaning in running away from family life or the world. If we set up a separate abode for God, then we can speak of going to Him, in preference to other places."

"Then, what of Vaikunta, Kailasa and other divine abodes?"

"True, true, they are supposed to exist; but why? After bestowing form on Gods, man had to provide them with homes as well. Vaikunta and Kailasa became the homes of Vishnu and Siva and this earth became our home. So God has to call us to his abode and we have to beg of Him to give us shelter there. All these are foolish ideas. There are desires we have created for ourselves. When we say we should not have attachments and desires, how can the attraction of Vaikunta be right, and that of the earth wrong?"

"They say, mukti or emancipation is to go and reside there. Then is there no rebirth? All devotees struggled to get away from birth in this world."

"It all amounts to rebuking that power for giving us life. At one time I too entertained such ideas. When they took away my young master and left me a widow, I could not realize what widowhood meant, and for a time I also had similar thoughts. Then I began to think and argue with myself: 'Supposing, instead of him, I had died earlier, what then? A day more or less—can any one escape death?' Since then I have never pined for early death; I would not beg for it.

"Along with the idea of rebirth, we think that we will have to be born often and suffer often—an unpleasant thought. So the desire for escape is utmost in our minds. You showed me that icon; the community of Jains, who revere that icon, believe in the ever-enduring bond of birth and the soul. Action leads to birth and birth to action. I don't exactly know how they explain this. All I know is the gist of their belief.

"Karma is the term that we use for deeds, good or bad. That good deeds lead to a good life in the next birth and bad deeds to a bad life is a belief that many people entertain. But how did the very first life originate? For Karma to originate, a life has to be lived somewhere. Soul and body have to appear together. It is only after that that a living being is capable of Karma. Before that no karma can exist. If it does, it is not our karma, but that of God.

"The purpose of having a body is to act, which is karma; there can be no life without action. A stone cannot perform karma. You and I are living beings and we are involved in living. No action, no life. At least you have to breathe in order to live. Having been born, we have to eat and drink to continue to exist."

"What then is your conclusion?"

"My conclusion is this—we are born; we live. Why? We do not know. We live in a way that is congenial to us and to those around us. By those around us I mean, everything that has life. That may be a difficult job. We may lack the ability to be of use to others. For many, even to get enough food becomes a task, leave alone the idea of helping others. They can do this much—"

"What?"

"Live in such a way as not to harm others. If we can't give happiness to others let us at least not harm them."

I began to ponder over granny's ideas and said, "That is a reasonable attitude. It seems sound. Granny, all our beliefs and all we have been saying about the beliefs have been handed down to us from ancient times by many people. Many of these beliefs are contradictory—say, for instance, the belief that God is everywhere, and the belief that God must take us from this world and retain us in His presence. Many such strange ideas have come down to us from the past. The ideas that we Brahmins have inherited supposedly come from the ancient Aryans ; and the Vedas are said to be their source. The idea of sacrifice came from them. The concept of Indra, Varuna, Mitra, about whom you spoke sometime ago, also came from them. Their belief in sacrifice led to various developments—such as Yajna, Ajamedha, Gomedha and even Naramedha (goat sacrifice, cow sacrifice and even human sacrifice). Then came a kshatriya, a born thinker, a king's son named Buddha, who condemned all the customs that involved violence. The Jains were another sect that opposed the earlier customs. I am told that Buddha himself never preached about 'going to God,' though he did preach that '*samsara*' caused attachment. This same Buddha's later disciples attributed to him so many births and narrated the stories of his lives."

"Like the births we bestowed on Vishnu and Shiva ?"

"Yes. The Jains of that period were hostile to the brahminical ideas of their times. So during those days there was keen competition among these three religions and their dogmas. There was also another important sect of people called the Shaktas ; this sect believed that 'Amma' was the supreme deity."

"Even that led to extremes. They bestowed on her so many terrible forms ! They drank before her, danced before her and offered blood sacrifice. The same people who first used the female and male genitals only as a symbol of creation worshipped sex, drank and danced at its altar."

"People of all faiths competed in creating myths and legends in order to establish the superiority of their own gods and to degrade others. They elevated their own deities to great heights and hurled others to the lowest depths. They made the gods of other religions the door-keepers of their deities and temples ! When we listen to all that, we get confused and do not know what gods and ideas to accept and what to reject."

"That's right ! I have suffered enough from that confusion. How many legends ! How many gods ! How many incarnations ! How many conceptions and how many misconceptions ! To separate the grain from the chaff, truth from falsehood is almost impossible."

Just then Kittanna's voice rang out, "Daddy, it is time for supper."

I said, "Granny, in our conversation I did not at all realize the flight of time. Let's go for food. My boy is calling us," and walked with her towards the house, taking the icon with me. I then went to the cowshed and quietly placed it on a wall. My other curios were also there. Though the icon was not such an unholy thing, I did not want it to catch Sita's eye. If Kittanna chanced to see it he would press me to give it to him and carry it all over the house, as if it were a red-sandalwood doll. If, on the other hand, Sita saw it, she would certainly remark, ''Shee, shee! Where did you get this from?''

That night I was extremely happy over the discussion I had with Granny, which added to my half-baked knowledge acquired from my own readings. With so much in my head while having my meal, I remarked, ''No soup today?''

''What was it that you ate first? You ate rice with soup and one other dish!'' ''Really! Was it I who finished soup plus something? What soup was that? What was the other dish?''

''Soup of wild tamarind. You consumed a good deal of rice with it. The other dish I made out of wild mangoes. I don't know where your mind was while you were eating! I don't know which Brahma created you'' remarked Sita.

I did not know if I had really eaten so much or my wife was just poking fun at me. Her scolding Lord Brahma who created me, instead of me looked like an insult.

''How do you know whom Brahma created? If there is a Brahma, he is one and only one person. The same Brahma that created you created me also'' I said.

''Yes, yes. I know. It is the very same Brahma who tied my lot to yours. You too have learnt rambling talk from granny. Probably you were talking just like this with her now What exactly do you want? You want soup or mango-dish?'' she asked.

''Let me have a little of both. However, see that you keep something for yourself.'' She brought some more rice first, then the soup. Then I could recognise its flavour. I mixed it with a little rice and ate it. Then Sita served me curry of wild mangoes. I enjoyed sucking the juice from three mango stones. Then, to tease her, I said, "The mistake was yours, not mine. If only you had served the mango curry with the stones in the very first instance, the stones would have remained there as witness that I had eaten the food. You know I like mango stones. Even then you did not serve them. Anyway, I can now say that both the preparations are delicious."

She rejoined quickly saying, "Even if I had served you the mango stones first, you were dozing and would have swallowed them and then denied my serving them. Anyway, today I have earned a merit 'certifit' at your hands."

At her word, 'certifit' I laughed. She had picked up one English word, but incorrectly.

She asked me what made me laugh.

I told her that when she pronounced the English word certificate as 'certifit', I could not but chuckle.

"I did not waste any money learning English like you," she jibed.

After dinner, I came out and suddenly realized that during our married life, we rarely enjoyed a repartee of this type. Every word from Sita usually sounded harsh to my ears. Now I discovered that she had wit, and that she could also cleverly detect when I behaved stupidly. After all, I was not more intelligent than she. Well, this excessive faith in her intelligence led me to a blunder later.

We were sleeping in the verandah and she was only a little distance away from me. She then slid towards me and asked "Are you asleep ?"

I could not get sleep at all for I was dancing behind the group of mendicants of granny's narration. It was then that Sita asked me if I was asleep. I said, 'No'. She was probably wondering that he who, in a wakened state could not remember having eaten, should be so awake in his sleep. "What were you talking about so long on the *aswatha katte* ? You went there before sunset and returned after almost three hours. Such a long talk; what about ?" The question was not cynical; it was out of feminine curiosity, I knew. I too, was in a genial mood. So, I told her everything that had taken place. The tale of the icon, what came before and after, the tale of Saint Purandhara, and all the talk about rebirth, I repeated. I told her about my ideas too. After hearing all these, can you imagine what she said ?

"She is just nuts; the whole world knows that! She can never regain her sanity. Can a wooden pestle sprout fresh leaves! Were you convinced by her advice ? To repudiate or reject all that our ancestors believed in, deny the gods, deny incarnation is preposterous. What will people say ? She is known to say such things. That is why she has been called a lunatic. Why should you go and listen to such things ? Whatever she says to you should go in one ear and come out of the other," Sita said. I knew her religious faith was different from mine. Yet, in order not to hurt her, I said, "All right, I will do so hereafter. I will hear with one ear and expel it through the other," said I, laughing all the while.

What you hear with one ear has to go through the brain first, and then only come out. Would it come out without doing anything in the brain is the question.

CHAPTER XIII

In spite of being very old, granny is free from bodily ailments. But we know that because of her old age she will not be with us long. So I am keen on learning as much as I can from her. I am sure that she will not intentionally tell me an untruth. Her deep insight into things makes me think that there is substance in most of her visions, although they may not be literally true. From the little history of my country I have studied, I can still recall something of the invasions in its history and the various religions followed by people. From this knowledge I can see that granny's visions have much truth in them. We, with our blind faith, may not relish her sharp, penetrating observations. She thinks differently from what the *puranas* and the sages have taught. Her doubts often make me uneasy.

What I appreciate most in her is her readiness to express views which she considers right. No taboo restrains her from speaking out her mind. Hers is not a philosophy based on logic ; she often says, ''To me it seems so.''

What a great difference between her and people like me! We have passively imbibed all the beliefs, customs and sayings that have come down to us in the sect, caste and religion into which we have been born. We are unable to distinguish sense from nonsense. I for one have been exposed to many new thoughts, those coming from other countries, other religions and modern science. Yet, I lack the courage to accept even the ideas I consider right. But with granny it is not so. She grew up totally immersed in her traditional surroundings, but still she is miles and miles ahead of me in outlook. How she burst the crust formed by her native culture is a mystery to me.

I had numerous plans for the summer. One was to take granny to the screwpine thicket and the interesting ruins in our village. There, on the spot, I would ask her my questions. I was very eager to know the ancient history of my village. But all my planning was in vain. The rains set in early, and went on for days together. Instead of clearing the coveted screwpine jungle bit, I had to coax my labourers to plough and plant my fields. So I put away from my mind all practical experiments till the monsoon was over But I carried on my discursive sessions with granny whenever the chances seemed good.

One day, quite unexpectedly, Nagi turned up at our house. She had brought a rattan box which she placed in the verandah of our house and called for the mistress. I was sitting in the yard, a little distance away, weaving a palm-frond mat. It was her words, 'Little mistress,' that made me look up and note her arrival. Thereafter, I heard her speaking to Sita.

"How much rice shall I give you for this?" my wife asked.

"Doesn't it look fine? It is made of rattan and is quite strong. It will be good to pack your clothes in. Please take it."

"You haven't told me what the price is. I have wanted such a box for a long time. Name a reasonable price for it.

I need a few more things - one or two small baskets, filter-baskets and vessel holders and the like.''

''You please take this inside first. My mistress, I did not bring this to sell. The other evening you served food to all the three of us. I can never forget that kindness. How can I repay that debt?''

''No, I don't want to accept it free. That day you came to my house hungry. As a housewife, it was my duty to feed you, otherwise what is my existence worth?''

Hearing those words of my wife, I raised my head and looked straight at the woman. It was then I recognised Nagi. I went there, lifted the box and inspected it. It was a fine piece of knitted cane-work. Just then I remembered that betelnut case of Ramanna. So I joined them in their conversation. ''This is a nice box which must have taken a fortnight's work. You had to get the cane from the *ghat* wall...That day I saw your face and I can guess how strenuous a job carrying that load was. Don't feel shy, tell me how many measures of rice you want.''

''Master, please don't talk of it. I came here today to give this to you and also for something else. I felt like speaking to your grandmother. One should not visit big people with empty hands and so I have brought this. I paid nothing for the cane; nor would I ask a price for my labour. You please take it. If it reminds you that there was once a woman called Nagi it is enough for me,'' said she.

Just then Granny's voice was heard from the inner room and Nagi's face beamed with joy. Granny said ''Child, take what she gives you and keep it. Is it not Nagi? She is like an orphaned calf of mine.'' I don't know how Sita felt about those last words. She then took away the box and gave Nagi the betel-leaf plate, also water, jaggery and a little beaten rice to satisfy her thirst and hunger. She then said "Since granny has asked me to accept it, I do so without a word. Don't go without having food here. I shall see if there is some old saree for you." Nagi felt extremely pleased and Sita went into the house.

That Sita should think of presenting Nagi with her old saree was a great surprise. It was her nature to use a saree till it was worn to shreds.

Granny came out and remarked "I don't think you are in a hurry ; you can go after food" and went back to her room. I went to the garden and was there till noon. At noon, after lunch, I enjoyed my siesta. Sita served food to Nagi, after which she gave her betel leaves and nut. Probably Sita did not know anything of Nagi's past history, otherwise she would not have behaved so pleasantly to her. After chewing the betel leaves Nagi waited for Granny. When I got up after my nap, I found Nagi was not there. I went out and looked towards the *Aswatha katte.* Nagi was sitting near granny, wearing a different saree, a faded one. It must be the one that Sita gave her. When all these thoughts struck me one after another, I surmised that a great change must have come about in Nagi's life already. I was curious to know what that change was. My legs were pulling me towards the *Aswatha katte* but I dared not go, for fear of another rebuke like "You have no sense" from granny. But my curiosity was soaring and I wished granny herself would call me. I came back and walked about restlessly in the house and yard. Off and on I peered out of the door to ascertain whether Nagi was still there or had gone away.

It was three hours later that I saw granny sitting alone on the *Aswatha katte.* She must have sent Nagi away. I walked to the *katte* and when I went near, granny herself called me. I felt glad and sat by her side. I casually remarked "I think Nagi has gone away?"

"She had come purposely to see me. So when the talks were over, she left."

I curbed my curiosity and made no further querry. But she herself said :

"Child, I have done something and God alone knows the right and wrong of it. I never bothered to think about what people might say. My conscience said it was the right thing to do and so I advised Nagi to do something. You know after Nagi's last visit, Ramanna too came here. I also gave him the same advice. Not that they would obey me; I advised them that way, feeling that it would be nice if they acted according to it."

"What is it ?"

"It would make you laugh. I haven't forgotten what she was. I had seen her in the good old days when she was living with Ramanna. At that time, that uncle of yours, a monkey, played his mischievous game, bewitched her and carried her away. Even after that, Ramanna's love was not in the least affected. How many years have passed since all that happened! Now Ramanna is all alone. Till recently his younger or elder sister was living with him. They have now deserted him. Now he himself is the ox to turn his oilmill. But even today he is in a mood to accept her back home, though she deserted him after bearing two children and was deserted in turn by her lover. She later settled in a neighbouring village; I have forgotten the name. There, with a firm will she brought up her two sons. They are now in the prime of life. You saw them just the other day. It was then that Nagi unfolded to me her pitiful life and that of her children. She said "…….all this happened and since then I have known no other man. I struggled hard to raise my two boys to manhood and they are now young men. I deserve my fate for my foolish deeds but what of the future of my two sons? Should they not marry and live a decent life? But who will give them their daughters in marriage when they learn that they were born out of wedlock?" For this she wept piteously. I had no words to console her. I told her "Nagi, if those boys live with you, they will not be able to find brides." She went away that day and in two days' time your Ramanna called on me."

I asked teasingly "Is he my Ramanna?"

"Forget it; he is my child as well; she too is my child. What other children have I? When I saw Nagi's face, I felt she still retained her womanlines. But for the two children, she would have gone to Ramanna and begged of him to take her back. As a lone wolf he would have taken her too. The whole situation became complicated because of the children. With this thought in mind I said "These children will not give you any trouble. They are not yours, but still they are hers. Even if you call them your own children, your status will not suffer. She is not likely to have divulged to them who their father is. How can she say it?"...This, my boy, looks like an effort on my part to wash away the sins of your uncle. So I advised Ramanna. 'They are grown up and they can earn their bread. If their presence near you bothers you, let them go to the northern *ghats* and manage to live there. If they have a name to mention as their father's and if you are not ashamed of it, and if they are destined to live a family life—some one will offer them their daughters.' "

"Granny, you always mention fate, writing on our forehead and such things. Do you believe these ideas ?" I asked.

"Yes, I say so, and the words are a part of my vocabulary. When that Amma has created them as men, I do think that she has created women too, to suit them. That is her business. She would have enough sense to understand why she created the distinction between male and female."

"Ho ! You have attempted such a compromise ! What was the result ?"

"As I rightly expected, this same Ramanna went in earnest to Nagi's very door. He had sent a few massages earlier too. Now he paid a personal visit. This he could have done long back; though late, he did it now. I see nothing wrong in it !"

"Nothing wrong ?"

"You silly fellow ! When your uncle committed that ghastly sin, did any of our villagers go to him and admonish him to his face ! He was then rich and these people kept mum. It was he who broke up Nagi's family life. Which do you think is nobler, to restore a broken family or to break up a family ?"

"When Ramanna first called her back, did she not tell him that she was polluted food ?"

"There lies her greatness ! But look here, there is no comparison whatever between food tasted once, and a relationship between man and woman. Here within each body dwells a throbbing life. What the pangs and worries are how can you know? I have seen a few miserable families in this very village. People talk with an unbridled tongue. All that is hypocrisy. Doesn't the Ramyana tell you that Rama tested Sita, before taking her back from Ravana's home ? Even when he learned beyond the shadow of doubt that she was not polluted food, what did he do ? Quite the opposite is the tale of Gautama and Ahalya."

"Could all that be true ? A curse turning a woman to a stone and after a thousand years that stone turning back into a woman ? Is it ever possible ?"

"What turns to stone is our mind or heart. One would think that if Ahalya had remained a stone so long, Gautama would have vanished as smoke."

"Let me say this for argument's sake. Are the Mahabharata and the Ramayana true tales ? Are incarnations a fact?"

"How many times must I tell you that ? It is we who bestowed rebirths on the gods. It is our minds that do it. Does God need to assume an 'avatar' to create the world or to preserve it ?"

"That seems reasonable. Well, drop the story of Rama; tell me what happened to Ramanna" .

"There is no story in it. Nagi came to meet me and told me the rest of the tale. She said that they were now living happily together and she had sent her sons away to the ghats. She finds it difficult to live without them. But she also knows that this is the only way that her sons can find wives for themselves. If they stayed at home with their mother, evil talk would make it impossible for them to get brides. She wanted to unburden all that misery to me."

"What consolation did you offer her ?" I asked.

"What consolation ! 'The children have gone away. They are grown up and will eke out a living. If they remember you they will visit you. Let them search out brides for themselves'. If they can work and live, I am sure they will be able to pick up their partners in life from one caste or the other."

"Will it be proper ?"

"What?"

"To marry outside their caste?"

"You are a fool. The castes that God created are only two, male and female. We men created a thousand castes. Animals don't have castes. A male will not marry a male or a female another female. The union of male and female is God's will. If some people come in the way of God's will, they are to be blamed."

"Granny, customs about marriage differ from place to place and from age to age. Rules about it vary from class to class. Caste restrictions belong to that category. Let us forget it; but tell me this. I find it difficult to accept something in the Ramayana. It is said that when Dasaratha thought of crowning his son Rama, he was about ten thousand years old."

"I am sure even Dasaratha would have resented such longevity. If a man and a woman were to live for hundreds and hundreds of years, I am sure they would refuse to be bound by marriage. It is because of such fictitious statements that the little truth in a story is apt to be disbelieved."

"So you don't believe the Ramayana and the Bharatha and in Rama and Krishna?"

"What I believe are a few sober statements the works contain. Like Rama and Krishna ever so many gods were created. So much so, there are more gods than men. I have been so often telling you that if a god really has power he needs no incarnation. All these legends are like the fictitious ghosts that we create for children."

I experienced great pleasure in talking to my granny, but felt a little nervous that I was being observed by Sita. I expressed my fear to granny, "I believe that there is a lot of truth in what you say. But if these same words were to be told to Sita, she will never accept a word."

She just laughed and said, "I know what Sita believes. I was born long before she crossed the threshold of our house. She is like anybody else; she may doubt my sanity like other people. But what can I do ? Should I go before others and declare that I am perfectly sane ?

"But you see, Sita never gets into squabbles with me on any score. She shows no disrespect; she has spoken no harsh word to me. If she feels that I am insane, let her feel so. Even if she thinks so, she has not shown any disrespect to me. She is a noble woman. She may feel that I am too talkative. For over ten years, I kept silent, and justified the name my parents gave me. It is only after they passed away that I developed courage, and thought to myself 'Why should I care what others say ?' Then I began to open my mouth. People scolded me ! But I never thrust my words on any one."

"Once to Janna, and once to Anantha you made needless remarks !"

"Yes, I did say something to their face. That was because I could read their minds. They were playing a double game. I showed them that this game would not deceive me."

I gained much courage from granny's words. After sunset I took her home; then at home I told Kittanna some stories. Just as I began a story saying, 'Once upon a time there was a Brahmarakshasa...' something stuck in my throat. The boy querried, "What did he look like ?" So, without thinking I had to describe a person whom I had not seen at all. I concocted quite a number of imaginary and inconsistent details and then Kittanna asked me, "Weren't you afraid of him ?" His next question was, "In what tree does he live ?"

"In the banyan tree near Kapaleswar temple" I said.

"Will you show me that tree ?" he asked.

"You will be terrified if you see him."

"If you weren't, why should I be ? When will you show him to me ?"

"Sometime."

"No, tomorrow."

"Why such a hurry ?"

"You have told me this story once earlier. In it the Brahmarakshasa befriends that Brahmin boy, and gives him three stones that have magical powers. I too want to go to that Brahmarakshasa and get three such stones."

"Why ?"

"After that, I shall not stay here at home ! I won't bother mother for food. One stone gives me food; the second can make me invisible. With the third I can roam about the world as I like. So I will go round the world, travel for years on end, and never return home.. even after ten thousand years."

"After ten thousand years, you will return, I am sure. But then when you come your mother and I will be so very old that you won't recognise us at all."

"Then I will not be away so long. I will return tomorrow. I know that you and mother will be bored without me."

Sita must have overheard us. She grew angry and said. "Why should you tell children such stories ? They accept these false stories as true."

Kittanna intervened saying "On, are these false stories ? Then I don't want them at all !"

"Yes child; they are not at all true. Nowhere will such things happen."

I felt utterly deflated at this intervention. I wanted to teach her a lesson and said "Oh, your ten thousand-year-old Dasaratha existed, but not my Brahmarakshasa and his three stones!"

"Ah, what an intellect! I think then that this was the kind of talk you had with Granny this evening sitting on the aswatha katte!" she laughed.

I also laughed and said, "Sita, stop criticizing us and calling granny insane. She knows full well what you think of her. But what do you know about what she feels about you? She sincerely praised you so much. She compared you to coral, pearl and pure gold!" I told her everything that granny had said about her. She turned pale and said, "What can I do! She says so many things which are hard to believe. I believe in something and she says quite the opposite. At that I begin to entertain doubts about her sanity. But in spite of it, the way she treats me sometimes makes me feel that she is the goddess of the house."

"Granny says that each house should not have a separate god and it is enough if there is one god for the entire world."

After this discussion, I felt that in future Sita would not doubt my sanity if I spent some time with granny. But Sita did not want to continue with this topic and diverted the conversation to something else: "What about your friend Janardhana? He has not written home, it seems. I don't know how these people manage to forget their parents easily."

"No letter, it's true. But he is certain to come home. He works in Mysore and next vacation is sure to bring him home."

"No idea of a marriage?"

"He must know his own mind! Let him go his own way. In a way, it is better if he does not marry. If he does, one doesn't know what will happen to his wife!"

"That is true. Now come and have food. The rice is getting cold." So saying Sita went to the kitchen. Kittanna said he did not want food. He blamed his mother saying, "Why should mother have come? She intervened in the middle of a story and spoiled the whole thing."

"Tomorrow I will tell you a better story."

"The stories are not true, are they?"

"We call them stories when they are not true. A story is a story."

Kittanna followed me singing the words "A story is a story!"

The meal was over and I was still in possession of all my senses. May be because she had not prepared dishes of wild tamarind and mango! I came to the verandah, chewed betel and spreading a mat stretched myself. I had fine sleep the whole night.

With the rise of the sun, the sleep was over and I walked to the well, brushed my teeth, washed my face and had a bath. From there, I went to the deity's room where I finished my usual meditation and worship, sounded the bell and came out. There stood granny, claiming my attention. I moved towards her. She said :

"Child, my mind is a bit uneasy. I shall have a bath and return in a trice. My heart yearns to see Tippajji. Will you take me there?" Having said these words she went straight for her bath. I felt stunned. Her last visit some three months ago was the only occasion when granny had been there in the last thirty years. She had never asked me to take her to visit any friend or relation so far. Why did she make such a request today? Did she feel that Tippajji might not live long? With this disturbing thought I approached Sita and told her about it. She said, "She alone knows her mind. Please take her. We are here to serve her. How long we shall have that good fortune we don't know. So long as she lives with us, we should fulfil her wishes."

Granny soon returned after the bath. Sita went to her and pleaded, "Eat at least a little before you leave. You have to walk ; please don't go with an empty stomach."

"Give something to your husband. I don't want anything. I don't feel like touching any food till I see Tippi." Without further ado, I ate a little wet beaten rice along with jaggery and then we left home together. Slowly we walked up to Hindugana Amma's shrine. She showed no inclination to stop there. When we walked further, by the paddy fields to Tippajji's house, the sun was already high in the sky. We entered the yard and could see some one lying in the verandah of the house. There resting her back against a pillar sat Tippajji's daughter-in-law with her two children.

From granny's mouth came the words, "This was what I saw this early dawn!" I felt amazed. Just then that forlorn woman came running up to granny and said "It is God who sent you here. Since the last two days Tippajji has not touched food or water. I don't think she will last long. I am unable to stir out, leaving these two poor children here. My husband went away to Hannur, in spite of my opposition. It is all right if she survives till he returns or else..." then she began to cry.

Granny stroked the distraught woman's face and said, "Don't be afraid. We are here to do whatever needs to be done. She will live as long as she is destined to drink the water of this place. After that who can stop her from going? Can you, or can I?"

"Since yesterday she has been silent. Now and then she opens her eyes. She has lost her eyes......"

"Can she understand if we speak to her? Does she move her limbs? What is the use of asking you, who have lost all courage ? Be calm." Granny washed her feet, got up, went into the verandah and sat by the side of Tippakka. She stroked both her palms and held them in hers. I was witnessing all this, in a daze, standing quite near them. Then granny said aloud, with her mouth very near Tippi's ear, "I have come, Mooki has come. Can you recognise my voice? It is I who have come. It is Mooki......What do you see?"

At this Tippajji's lips moved a little causing a surge of joy in us ; granny called out to the daughter-in-law : "Bring a spoonful of sacred water ; let me put it in her mouth." She rushed and brought a spoonful of Ganges water from a little pot. Holding it, granny spoke loudly into Tippajji's ears : "It is Ganges water ; please drink." Tippajji swallowed it and moved her lips. Then she said something in a low voice.

In a louder voice, granny said, "Tippakka, why entertain such fears? Whom have you harmed that you should incur the wrath of Yama? None of his servants will come. It is your "Amma" who is asking you to go. Go to her. No child need fear to approach the Mother. After a few days I too shall follow you. She asked you to go and dance on this earth a few days. You came end danced nicely too. You have danced so much that your body is all wrinkled. Your limbs are tired. She is not a fool to ask you to dance any more. That is why she is beckoning you to go."

Tippi seemed to have said something in reply, which, however, I could not hear. On the other hand, granny who could read the minds of people, must have understood every word of it. She said, "Don't have any doubts. Why fear approaching her, your own mother? It is she who is calling. It is to give you courage that I have come. A long time ago, you came to give me courage. Now I am doing it for you." So saying granny called the daughter-in-law and her children near. They came and bowed their heads one by one. Granny placed Tippi's warm palm on each one's head. Looking at them she said, "Don't lose heart. Tippi's blessings will protect you all." At this, the young daughter-in-law broke into tears. Granny looked at her sternly and said "Don't weep! Is that the way to bid farewell to a great soul! How long can she remain here? She has done everything she could for this house. She has given her all and now she has bestowed on you her last blessings. What more do you want?"

She then acted in an astonishing manner. She took Tippi's head in her hands and placing it on her lap, began singing a lullaby as if Tippajji were only a child. I don't know at what age she had learned the song. It was a strange time she chose to sing it! She sang six or seven stanzas, often peering into Tippajji's face, waiting for her last breath. Then she slowly placed Tippi's head back on the mat. She called me and ordered "You are her grandson now! Go out, look for four men and bring them. I hope her son will come. But the corpse may not keep till he returns." Sending me on that errand, she began to console the grief-stricken daughter-in-law and her children.

I realized that it was for this very purpose she had brought me to this place. I rushed to Manjunatha's house, got a boy to accompany me and went to a few neighbouring houses. I managed to gather a few people, who undertook the necessary tasks. I went back. It was a house visited by death and everything was silent there. We got information that the funeral pyre was ready. When they got ready to lift Tippajji's body, the question arose 'Who should carry the fire pot?' The people assembled there could not make up their minds. Granny looked at me and said ''Who else is there?'' ''Yes'' I said. It was just at that moment, most surprisingly, that the master of the house stepped into the yard, perspiring profusely. His remorse and lamentations were heart-rending. Granny had to scold him to silence, but she consoled him too. With that we men moved to the cremation ground, to reduce to ashes the mortal remains of Tippajji. Even granny went with us. When we returned home, the sun was setting.

CHAPTER XIV

After Tippajji's death I could see a definite change in the attitude of Sita towards my granny. Our *aswatha katte* conversations ceased to provoke her. She no longer regarded them as foolish talk. She began to feel that because of age, granny needed some outlet for her long suppressed desires. Now that she had a grandson, she would naturally be pouring out her thoughts to him.

So, thereafter Sita never referred to our conversations. On the other hand, I would say to her "Well, this is what granny thinks. What do you say ?" She would reply "She is free to hold any view. She has her view point and I mine. I follow my elders; I have a mind of my own; I hold my beliefs. Just because she says all that, I am not in the least perturbed."

"You mean her words don't have an iota of truth ?"

"Truth or untruth–who knows ? Why should I sit in judgment ? What I believe is true for me and what she believes is true for her. That is all," she would say.

Because of the change in Sita's attitude, I felt more at ease. I think I can recall when Sita's attitude took such a sharp turn. It was on the day that I reported to her all that grandmother had said and done when she saw Tippi on her deathbed and the way in which she gave solace to a dying soul. Her one utterance "Need a child be afraid to go to its mother ?" brought copious tears from Sita's eyes. When I narrated how she sang a lullaby while Tippi passed away, Sita remarked "She is not just granny; she is Amma herself." I too felt the same way. There is something in her so great, which we fail to recognise. After this conversation there was some further change in Sita. Every Monday evening, she used to visit Kapaleswara temple with her two children. Now she chose a new goddess for her Friday evenings. That was the 'Amma' of Hindugana, two miles away. Probably Sita thinks that the 'Amma' that granny often speaks of is the 'Amma' of Hindugana. But the 'Amma' of granny's mind is far greater than even Jagadamba of Manjunatha. That is an 'Amma' who created the world and an 'Amma' who gave meaning to the relationship between the individual and the world. This great idea could not have struck Sita at all. For, one day, I overheard Sita saying to a visitor "One day my child developed high fever. I went and begged 'Amma'. By the time I returned from the temple, the fever had vanished." I knew my granny would never beg this or that of God. She never respected such beggars, or that attitude. I remember her having made this remark once, "You think she does not know each individual's troubles ; it is only after you file a petition before her that she will come to know of them !"

I then argued, "Granny, why should she on her own bestow things, without a prayer ?" To this, her reply was, "There is no rule that she must bestow things which we beg for. She may give such things as are good for her children. If she has not already given them those things, then there must be a sound reason for denying them. If it is a thing to be given she will give it ; no begging is necessary. Besides, she has created us only after providing for all our needs." I had racked my brains over this attitude for quite some time and had grown bewildered.

The monsoon was over and the harvest done. After a period of one month, coolies came to boil the paddy and pound the rice. During that period, granny would listen to numerous tales. The workers would sing and talk. There would be tales of poverty; there would be the tale of Rama discarding Sita. Granny would hear such tales, and keep muttering to herself. In a few months the second crop reached home. We separated the grain from the chaff and pounded the chaff, making it suitable for cattle feed. These things recur every year. How boring!

If there were not a few festivals in the midst of these monotonous and dry days of uninteresting work, village life would be dull.

There is the period of religious ceremonies that usually comes after the monsoon showers abate. There are 'Nagara Panchami,' 'Vinayaka Chouti', 'Navarathri' and 'Anantha Festival' and the like, coming swiftly one after the other. After that, all activity ceases and then it is like the hibernation of frogs at the close of the monsoon. The minds become insert. Winter begins. It is only at the close of winter when a mad wind begins to blow that we are reminded of the great festival ''Sivaratri'', in honour of Lord Siva.

On 'Sivaratri' Day we are all expected to observe a fast. We call this 'Upavasa'. It actually means not fasting but substituting wheat or something else for rice. All of us-including granny and Kittanna-fast that way. That evening all of us go to the Kapaleswara temple. Numerous religious rites are observed there. The idol is bathed for hours. Vedic hymns are chanted; '*arati*' is waved. We all come home after receiving God's '*prasada*' consisting of sandal paste and bilwa leaves.

The custom in our house is to cook food only after returning home from the Poojas. Steamed pudding called 'kadubu' is prepared. A mixture of blackgram and rice is first turned into paste, allowed to ferment a little and then put into small packets made out of stitched jack leaf or cylinders made out of screw pine leaves. This is cooked in steam. It is believed that Lord Siva is not satisfied without this offering. Since all this takes a lot of time, we become sleepy waiting for food. On 'Sivaratri' day, while having bath, I thought of the programme for the day and told myself that I should coax granny and take her with me to the Kapaleswara temple.

Long before sunset Sita took the children, went to her friends and then to the temple. When the sun was about to set I urged granny saying, "It is a long time since you went to the temple. I wish to walk with you to the temple and spend some time there."

"Why not?" she said.

"They have yet to get the roof of the Music Pavilion repaired. In two months, the annual festival is due. I don't know if the work can be completed by then." So prefacing the issue, I took her out; we walked by the side of the low paddy fields and then through the scrub jungle leading to the temple. When I approached the temple precincts, I noticed that many people had gathered there. My purpose in getting her there was to watch her reactions and neither of us wanted a crowd near us. So I went round the temple thrice in order to find a quiet spot. The inner circumambulatory passage was full of people. So I stood before the front door, bowed and then looked about, when I caught sight of the roofless music pavilion.

"We had better go and sit there till the worship is over," I said to myself and led granny to that place. We sat on the platform of the pavilion. Except for the sounds of the temple bells and people's talk brought by the wind, the place was fairly quiet. We must have passed almost an hour without uttering a single word. When the temple bells pealed granny remarked all of a sudden, "Child, I feel a bit uneasy; I hear strange sounds and experience strange visions too."

After a little while she exclaimed "Strange! They say 'The mother-in-law has her day and the daughter-in-law too has her day.' The idol installed here is Sivalinga–that's certain. A few Brahmin families were worshipping it for decades. Then this temple was no bigger than the little shrine of Amma's at Hindugana. Today it has grown to huge proportions-there is a Nandi pavilion, a huge facade, a wall all round. All these were not there in the early days. Then this region passed into the hands of people of a different religion. They were worshippers of the icon you showed me that day. They were a group of people who even began to mock at this phallus-god. Some even gave up their old religion. All this went on for four decades! Then there were no Brahmins left here to conduct the worship of this ancient God. After all, God does not need our worship or praise of any sort." And then she became silent again.

Seeing her lapse into silence, I plied her with a few questions. "Then how is it that this temple grew in size? Only the foundation of the old sanctuary would have survived to this day." She did not reply at all. She only asked, "Where is the music pavilion—here?"

"Granny, you are seated on that very platform. It is the same structure that lost its roof last summer."

"Now I see some meaning. When the old Siva temple lay uncared for, the king who conquered this territory used to visit the region constantly. It was the same man or his successor who replaced the early Vishnu's idol with the nude figure. One day his second wife, who was very dear to him, became suddenly ill. It was some serious illness and she was on the verge of death. I can see her emaciated face. They tried everything for her-medicines, magic and all that. The king whose passion for her was intense, saw her lovely body consumed by illness, and felt very distressed. At that time some one suggested to him that there was a great sage in Hindugana, who might be able to save his queen. At this, the king immediately rode through this village to Hindugana. What a sight was there! A host of mendicants, of whom I must have told you earlier. They had smeared ash all over the body. The hair on their heads was an uncombed stack. Some of them did not wear even a loin cloth. They were all devotees of Bhairava. They slept during the day and worshipped during the night. The cremation ground was their home. I can figure out their guru, a dark-skinned hefty man. He looked so terrible that children would scream and run away at the very sight of him. He holds an iron trident in one hand and a real human skull, in the other."

"Is he the teacher of the Kapalis? There was a sect of people called by that name who were devotees of Bhairava," I said.

"They are devotees all right; but I can't make any sense of their mode of worship. They perform penance; they are after the acquisition of eight unusual powers! They draw peculiar patterns on the floor; burn huge fires; chant queer hymns. They sit for long hours, their eyes closed. They drink liquor (toddy) from skull-cups. Both men and women join in the worship of Bhairava. Shiva is never spoken of as Shiva by them. To them he is their Kala-bhairava."

"What is the form of their worship? What is their object?"

"That I can't say. Their attitude to God is strange. I don't like it. You see, Shiva made Uma his wife. According to us Shiva is a severe ascetic. But these people's conception of Him is different. These people desire sexual union with a woman who is as lovely as Uma. They want everlasting enjoyment. Should one do all this just for that? I wonder! Why should they acquire wide powers by penance? To rule over whom? And why?"

I felt that she had lost the trend of her thought and therefore pointed out, "Granny, you didn't tell me what that Jain king who went to meet the Kapali guru did? Granny, in the good old days, we had Jain rulers in Hemmady very near our place. They came to our place from Hombucha, beyond the Westren Ghats."

"Be it Hemmady or Guddammadi, I don't mind. He was a king and with his courtiers he hastened to meet the Guru of these Kapalis. He fell prostrate before that guru and narrated to him his woes. The guru gave him some holy ash and the king rushed home with it.

"I don't know what happened after that. But I see the same king later on washing the feet of the very same guru in this very place, I mean, where this pavilion stands. I see a large crowd of people watching the scene. The queen must have recovered because of the 'ash' he gave. That would have changed the king's mind. His ancestors of early days were devotees of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva; and their descendants for a few decades became converts to another faith. This king in turn is now changing his religion. After all, it is like changing one's garb. Seeing the king change his religion his followers also do so. The real agony is that of people who are more sincere and whose faith is deep-rooted. They suffer much. Otherwise, there is nothing strange! Whatever we do knowingly or unknowingly reaches Him or Her.

"For about another century this place was the arena of so many religious activities. Hundreds of masons and stonecutters slaved to rebuild the old shrine. They then began to call this idol Bhairava instead of Siva. On each side of the idol they built a small shirne and installed the idols of Durga and Virabhadra. The main shrine expanded, with a navaranga, the frontage, an outer wall and so on. New festivals came to be celebrated. The surrounding verandhas began to get crowded with visiting medicants. They were immersed in smoking ganja, and consuming liquor and meat as part of their rituals. Could such things have really happened here? Unbelievable. I see here something more. Even sheep and buffaloes were sacrificed at this spot. Then what followed is not clear. Their guru moved away with some of his followers to some different region, never to return. His followers continued here for the next fifty years or more, smoking, drinking, practising witchcraft and eyeing local damsels. All the magic that the old guru spread over this area melted away in course of time, so that the later day mendicants never earned respect here. Their days were over. Several endowments had been bestowed on this temple. This attracted a few Brahmin families from the sea coast. They came and settled here. They performed rites of purification as if it had been desecrated by the earlier worshippers. Old Siva, who later became Bhirava, now became

Kapaleswara. 'Kapala' meant the skull-cup that the guru held in his hands. Even Siva has a similar title. He is called 'Rundamali' or the wearer of a skull-garland.

"Then the days passed without much change. A few of the converts among the earlier mendicants were called 'Jogis.' 'Yogi' is 'Jogi'. They seemed to have been votaries of 'Hatha Yoga'. After the exodus of outside 'jogis' a few local 'jogi' families still lived hereabout. But today you can't find a single person belonging to that sect."

Since the temple bells began to peal continuously, I took granny to the door of the sanctum and stood there with her, doing namaskara. Granny just stood beside me. Her lips were muttering and I am sure before her mind was a different scene. I feared that it would lead to unpleasant consequences and pleaded, "Granny, Sita will bring prasada. We shall go and rest somewhere." I came out with her and sat near the outer facade. Sita noticed that we were going out. After the *arati* was over, and *prasada* was distributed, she came out with the children and joined us. We all proceeded home. On the way Kittanna asked, "When will they fill the okuli pit with water?"

"Okuli pit! It has its own legend," remarked granny. Sita must have heard her remark and so said, "Let us hurry home. I have to go and prepare food." So after reaching home Sita toiled in the kitchen, and served us pudding, *payasa* and other dishes. Our celebration of Sivaratri was over. People are expected to keep awake the whole night, meditating on Siva. To ensure the observance of this, the queer custom of throwing stones at neighbouring houses by mischievous children has come into vogue. However, there is no such custom in our village. I had overstuffed my stomach and gone to bed. The whole night I was plagued by nightmares.

If granny had seen ten Kapalikas in her visions, in my dreams I saw thousands of them. The mendicants lit a big fire, drank and danced around the fire. They chanted and yelled around some picture on the floor. Then they behaved like lunatics. They lost all sense of decency and indulged in sexual orgies. Then, all of a sudden, they surrounded our house, yelled and broke open the door and rushed towards me. Some of them dragged me to the spot before the Kapaleswara temple, where the music pavilion now stands. There was a stake there. They tied me to it. I could see them ready to chop off my head with a sword. In terror I shrieked, ''Ajji, Ajji.'' My shout attracted Sita who rushed towards me. It brought granny too. Granny asked me why I screamed. I was still screaming but found that my voice failed even when I wanted to draw their attention. Sita came to me, shook me a little and said, ''Wake up, it is morning.'' This gave me new life. When I recollected the whole dream, I could not but think of the miserable days when the Kapalikas actually lived around my village. To tell you the truth, that day I did not regain my mental composure till after lunch and a good sleep. Even during the day, the fear of the Kapalikas haunted me.

Towards the evening, when I saw granny move towards the aswatha tree I went and sat by her and pleaded, ''I should not bother you so much; but please finish the tale of that *okuli* pit.''

She remarked, ''Oh, then all those things that I told you are mere tales to you ? Yes, they do sound like stories. Come, come, sit down.'' She then began to narrate the story of the *okuli* pit.

''Don't think that yesterday's experience was the first in the music pavilion — no, no, not so. Earlier, two or three times

I had similar experiences. You know what caste our Badiya, Kitta and Govinda belong to?" she asked.

"They are fishermen."

"Fishermen, true. What are they doing here? By tradition, they are not farmers. These people now are farmers, whereas their ancestors, who came from the Byndoor coast, were fishermen by caste and by profession, too. They are devotees of the sea-goddess and not the earth-goddess, because it is the sea-goddess who provides them with food! After all the word 'God' would only mean that much. The creator is 'God'; He who provides you with food is God. One day, in their fishermen's colony, smallpox raged and took toll of a large number of their population. They vowed special worship to their local 'Amma' and also to the famous 'Amma' of Sirsi. But all through the year the disease raged. So the few remaining fishermen and women left the place in sheer dread. There were a few thousand houses here. In those days our Hindugana Amma was as famous as Mookambika of Kollur. This region was then ruled by a petty chieftain or king. In those days, my boy, even the ruler of a dozen villages called himself a king. The Moodoor chieftain was one such petty king. He wanted recruits for his army. The outsiders who came here sought service in his army for their livelihood. Though they had left their village for good, they couldn't forget their native god. During that period the Kapaleswara temple was just a 'Siva' shrine. Over quite a wide area around the temple grew a settlement of these army recruits. They carved out of wood an idol representing their sea-god, stuck it up at one point outside the temple precincts and there dug a huge pit. One day in the year, they filled it with water, worshipped the idol and then dived in the pond and bathed.

This was the origin of your *okuli* pit. Their god's name was 'Houndaraya.' Their ancestors on the coast used to worship the sea itself as god, when the monsoon subsided. Now that they were away from the sea-shore, this pond symbolized the sea. They called it their 'Houndaraya.' "

I laughed at her words.

"What makes you laugh?" she asked.

I told her "I can clearly see what happened. Houndaraya is no god or king. People of Byndoor or the seacoast call the sea 'Soundra' instead of Samudra. The *Okuli* sport must have been a sport staged before the court of the sea-king. Even today, those who come here for the water sport shout the words, 'Houndrayana olagavo!' It means 'the court of the sea king.'"

"In course of time, the population of fishermen dwindled. Now we have barely three or four families. Siva became Kapaleswara. Then Brahmins who came from other regions and settled here took over the temple and its worship. But somehow the 'sea god' ceremony became a ritual connected with the annual festival of Kapaleswara. But how it became an '*Okuli*' pond I cannot surmise."

The seeds of many such thoughts that granny sowed in my mind sprouted and my little knowledge of history nourished them. I wanted to pursue the subject and asked my brother Narayana to bring me a few books that would enlighten me further. He would come in a few days with his wife for the summer holidays. Any way, he would or should pay a visit to granny. I had also written that, in case his coming was delayed, he should send the books through someone who might be coming to our village.

Now, I have two more things on hand, which I must expedite. One is to clear the jungle, where I expect to find a well or Naga stones. The other job is to go with Annu to Nagankal caves a second time. My last visit had been a hurried one and I had taken Janna as my companion. This time I could visit the place with Narayana and stay there a little longer. I would perhaps not discover anything new but I was certain that at last I would learn something more about the past glory of the kingdom of Moodoor.

Just four days after this, Janna's mother came running to our house. I have gone to her house a hundred times but never has she come even once. She came, got into the house and spent a good deal of time with Sita pouring out her agony. At the moment I paid little attention to her. It was only in the night when I got a full report from Sita that I felt immense sympathy for her. Janardhana's father is not in good health, he is a rheumatic patient. He can't move about in his house any more. He is very much grieved about the behaviour of his disobedient son. Janna's mother, too, is worried about him. Last year, he abruptly cut short his vacation and returned to Mysore and did not write a letter to his parents. I thought he was doing so in order to avoid pressure from them about his marriage. Manjunatha has told me enough about his adventures in hunting for a bride. His visit to our relatives in Shimoga last year is still fresh in my memory. His nasty habit of visiting the homes of prospective brides, enjoying all hospitality from them and then walking away quietly without in the least caring to say 'yes' or 'no' to the marriage offer has made me feel disgusted with his behaviour.

A month back he wrote to his parents to send him three thousand rupees urgently. He added that it was to buy a site for a house for himself ; he explained that he had already paid an advance of five hundred rupees, and that if he failed to pay the three thousand, he would lose both the site and the advance. The request was, of course, all right, if he had really decided to build a house in Mysore. But first of all he should have known that his parents did not have even three hundred rupees in cash, let alone three thousand. They were not in a position to borrow the amount either. So his father wrote to Manjunatha of 'Jagadamba Vilas Hotel, "If it is a fact that Janna is intent on building a house there, can you advance him three thousand rupees on the security of our property?" Manjunatha made some enquiries locally. He found no substance in Janardhana's statement. So, to make sure, he broached the topic with Janardhana and asked him to show him the site. Janardhana showed him a site. When enquiries were made of the owner, he declared Janardhana had never met him. Manjunatha had no choice but to inform Janna's parents of the fraud their son had planned. That upset his parents. His father wrote to Janna saying "I am down with illness. I don't know how long I am going to live. Please come home urgently!" Would he come?

It was about this that Janna's mother came to my house. She poured out all her misery. "My husband is not in a position to stir out of the house. Your husband is Janna's friend. It would be a great comfort to us if he could go to Mysore and with the help of Manjunatha there, find out the facts about my son." Sita promised her that she would talk to me. So she passed on the information to me. Now, I am obliged to carry the weight of their sorrow. If a childhood friend like Janna turns out to be such a strange personality, can I help feeling unhappy ?

I had to leave for Mysore all of a sudden. I went to Janna's house and tried to infuse courage into his parents. I fixed the day of my departure. The previous day I asked granny, "I am going with a certain object. What wlll the result be? Male or female?" She said, "Barren." She uttered it with a chuckle and I had to accept it for whatever it meant. After telling her I left for Shimoga. The whole day I spent in the bus. Without even thinking of meeting Narayana or my new relatives, I rushed to the railway station in Shimoga. Somehow, I managed to get into the crowded train. I was just a sheep in a flock. At midnight I had to change the train at Arsikere Junction which I did; when finally I arrived at Mysore it was morning. Since Manjunatha's Jagadamba Vilas Hotel stood in Sivarampet very near the station, I rushed there straight. Manjunatha was overjoyed to see me, he said, "I have been pressing you so long to come, you have come now." "How can I not respond to that invitation?" I remarked jocularly. His enthusiasm to host me with ever so many sweets and drinks was overwhelming. As a hotel-owner he prepared for me many dishes with fanciful names of Sultans of bygone days!

That day after a little rest I gave him an account of the last day of Tippi. He knew of it but not the soul-stirring details. My narration evoked eulogies to the departed soul and also to my granny.

At about four in the afternoon, Manjunatha put a straight question: "How many days will you stay with me? We may need at least a week to see Mysore, Srirangapatna, Nanjangud. People come from all over India to see these places."

I had to tell him plainly "At best I can stay for three days. That too to please you and on condition that you will not kill me by pressing me to eat your fantastic sweets. I have come here for some work which, with your assistance, I want to finish in a day; and then I shall spare two days. Then I return home after a day's stay with our relatives in Shimoga."

"Then you have come on some work! All right, whatever help I can give you, I certainly shall. Tell me what it is." I told him what I knew about Janna. He said with a melancholy face, "Subbarao, I am not a jealous person. Nor would I tell you a lie; do you trust me that much?"

"If I had no trust in you, would I have come straight to you?"

"Then listen to me. It is a closed chapter."

"When I started for Mysore, I asked granny and her opinion was that my attempt would be futile. You confirm it."

"You see, your Janardhana is too clever. He has caused disappointments to many parents of girls of marriageable age after exploiting their hospitality, creating hopes in them and enjoying their attention. In one or two places he had even promised to marry the girls and taken them out with him and fooled them. How long can this sort of thing continue? In one such venture he has been trapped. Because of his promise, a girl yielded to him, with the natural consequence. Her parents caught him and put pressure on him. He thought he could escape by paying some money. But that would not work. Now his wedding is over; it took place in a local church — that was the latest I heard of him. If you want to meet him, I will find out his whereabouts. We can both pay a visit to the new couple. If you want, you may take some presents too. This is the true story.'' He could say nothing more and I too was disinclined to continue with the topic. I was very much upset, though it was not a calamity directly involving me. My responsibility was to relay this sad news to Janna's aged parents. So, finally I had to leave Mysore with my head hanging in shame. In my misery I did not feel like stopping at Shimoga. I dashed home straight. There I unburdened myself to my granny. She remarked, ''I felt that way when I saw him. Even on earlier visits he seemed to me to be a man of that type. This was what I expected of him. Nothing unexpected has happened.''

CHAPTER XV

For a few days Janna's affairs haunted my mind. His parents'agony must have been intense. But as days passed I forgot the whole thing. But I could not forget my own hope of investigating the jungle area. Once again, I went to the granite bed and surveyed the jungle near it. Then straight I went to my tenant Govinda ; he was one of my trustworthy workers. Taking him to the screwpine overgrowth I told him, "You see, this spot has become a thicket. I want it to be cleared, so that I can see the soil and layout. I want you to do it at once, without asking me any questions."

Govinda replied, "But I know what you are thinking of. If there is a good source of water this place will make a fine arecanut garden. This must be government land. Have you spoken to the Shanbogue?"

"Govinda, you are an intelligent fellow ; you are right. But you see, the Shanbogue lives at Vandse. Even if our village is on fire, he will not come to our rescue. Anyway, if we are sure of a water source we can think of the next step. I want you and your three brothers to clear the area. The whole thing must be done as secretly as possible. Or else, all my plans may be upset."

Govinda said, "Leave it to me."

"Come and tell me as soon as it is fairly clear."

He began to clear the undergrowth. I told him that I would not go there for two days. In fact, I was feeling nervous about this venture. The land belonged to the forest department. Even otherwise, the news of any attempt like this would spread like wild fire and some fool might think I was on a treasure hunt. So, it was better to keep the whole thing a secret.

After two days, I once again visited the spot. Govinda had really done a good job. He had completely cleared the undergrowth. The clearing was perfect, as only the stems of trees projected above the ground. One could have a clear view of about a hunded square yards. Treading upon ash I walked about the place. Indeed I found there a fairly deep but narrow well dug in the laterite soil. Neighbouring trees had sent down roots to its walls. Looking into a dark hole gives one no idea whether there is water. So I threw a stone into the well. That produced a soft thud, as if it had hit wet mud. Govinda must have suspected the presence of snakes in the area and so he had burnt the clearing. The presence of the well made sense. It was from this that water was supplied to the granite basin. It was easy to infer that human beings had once lived there. This made me study the area with greater care. The earth there was soft, humus ridden with the annual deposit of dry leaves. There were some basements of small houses, built out of stone, and a small *katte* too—all of them in ruins. I went to Govinda's house, brought him there and showed him the old narrow well.

''I had also observed it'' he said.

''Perhaps we should clear this well and test it for water. Now it may be filled with mud. I think this well is within the legitimate kumki right of my own lands. If it is a useful well, why not build a tenant's house here?''

Next day Govinda took some labourers and went to the site to clear the well supposed to be within my kumki land.

That day I was there, watching the progress of the work from morning till evening.

Govinda in fact was a clever fellow, who would not take unnecessary risks by simply getting down into the well without the right precautions. He first devised a plumbline and dropped it into the well to ascertain its real depth. Next he went home and came back with a small oil-drenched torch. He drew back the plumbline and tied this light to its end and once again let it down very cautiously. The torch burned till it reached the bottom of the well. But its light was insufficient to light up the area.

''Can you see the bottom clearly? Is there water?'' I asked.

He smiled and said, ''No, no, the torch was not for light but to test if there was "*isgali*" in the well. An uncle of mine once got into a well thoughtlessly and never came out. Two of his children who went after him also failed to return. Then only people suspected that it contained '*isgali*''' he explained.

Not understanding him I said, ''You mean by *isgali* some spirit like 'Hayguli,' haunting the well?''

''No, no, I mean poisonous air that hits one's nose. You ought not to breathe it.''

I appreciated his intelligence. After withdrawing the plumbline, he tied a long rope to the stump of a tree near by and let down its end into the well. The end could easily reach the bottom. With the help of this rope, he slowly slid down, closely examining the wall and then landed on the bottom. After this he returned to report that things were all right. He felled a tree stem and laid it across the well. The women put a rope around it so that they could draw up mud baskets. Govinda went down with a spade and pick axe. His sons stood on the edge of the well to pull up baskets of mud and let empty ones down; and his womenfolk carried the mud and earth a little distance away and heaped them in a corner. The clearing of the well took a whole day. Late in the evening, Govinda's spade struck something that produced a metallic sound. They then stopped the work for the day. I paid them a rupee each, promising to pay the balance in rice the next day.

Next day too the work continued. Instead of mud white clay came out. All my attention was concentrated on the mud heap in the corner. The workers were not in the least interested in it; but I was deeply concerned with that only. As if it was just a game, I was probing the heap with a long stick. When the sun was about to set, Govinda came up from the well and reported, "Master, there is a strong ooze nearly four fingers thick from the eastern wall! It is a very good well; but perhaps its sides may collapse because the lower layer is of white clay. It is sure to be kneedeep in water by tomorrow morning."

Next day I called Govinda home; making sure that Sita was busy in the kitchen, I gave the balance of wages in the form of rice. I said to him, "Govinda, I should first show the land map to the Shanbhogue, to make sure that the well comes within the boundary of my land. Otherwise, all my labour may be wasted. If I am certain it lies within my boundary, I would like to build a stone wall to enclose the well. But for that I may have to wait till after the next monsoon."

As he was about to leave after receiving his share of rice, he said, "I saw something strange as I was digging."

"What strange thing?" I asked.

"I did not tell you there; nor would you have observed it. I did not want to discuss it in front of the womenfolk. When I was digging the floor of the earth, a skeleton broke into pieces. I don't know if it belonged to some one who committed suicide, or to some one who was murdered. The skeleton was broken to bits and my spade did further damage."

"May be it belonged to a cow or calf which slipped into the well," I said.

"No, master. In the last basket I sent up, I carefully hid the skull in the mud. I was terribly hesitant and nervous. Whether it is a case of suicide or one of murder, the ghost of the person must surely be haunting that well!"

"Sheer madness! It must have happened ages ago!" I said and sent him away. With his exit my curiosity and wonder began to rise to feverish pitch. After lunch, I took a billhook and went after the treasure. I took a gunny bag too with me. Two days had passed but that wet mud would not have still dried up. I began to probe the mud with my palms, and when necessary, with the billhook. I discovered a lot of potsherds which also indicated an ancient habitation. I found two ladle and spoonlike things made of copper. At one point, when I probed a clay-and-mud mixture lying topmost on a spread out area, I did come across the things that Govinda mentioned. I found legbones, thigh bones, a few ribs and vertebra bits. I was afraid of probing further. But my curiosity was insatiable. There was a large clod-like thing which I discovered to be a mud-covered human skull! It had lost the lower jaw! The upper teeth were firm; I could see the hollows of the eyes. 'I stroked it, touched it and held it in my hands. Then with a stick, I put it aside. This somehow brought to mind the picture of the Kapalis that granny had described.

For a few minutes I stood confounded with fear, hesitation or something I did not know. I was determined to complete my investigation before I left that place and take home whatever clues I needed. In my search, I came upon a mud-packed chain; when I rubbed it with the gunny piece I found it was made of gold. A real gold necklace. At one time it must have graced the neck of the lady whose skull I had found. I tied up the necklace in my shawl and put a few sundry objects like the copper implements in my bag. What about the skull and pieces of bones? Since I had one such piece already at home, hidden on the cowshed wall, I thought these too could go into my bag. Some day I would be able to present them to granny and to learn their history. After dusk I stealthily walked home with all these things. I put the bag on the loft in the cowshed. Then I hurried to the well to have a wash, lest Sita should find me with all the mud splashed on my body. That done, the traces of my secret venture were removed, and I felt bold enough to chant my evening prayers loudly; the sound penetrated Sita's ears steadily.

She came out and remarked "Why should you shout your evening prayers? Should *Shudras* hear them?" Naturally I lowered my voice and somehow finished my prayers. As I was coming from the well, I thought: "My Sita was born too late. She should have been born in the age of Manu the Law-giver. It would have been even better if she had been born in his house or at least among his people. Instead of wondering that a man like me is still saying his evening prayers, she is objecting to the volume!"

After eating dinner in a hurry I came out and asked granny if we could go to the aswatha katte. 'Yes,' she said. Then quietly I went to the cowshed, picked up the two copper tools and walked to the place. There was beautiful moonlight all round. I said nothing, but granny remarked, ''You have been in search of something. During these three days, what were you able to get?''

''Is it because you missed me at home?'' I asked.

''Even otherwise, I can sense it. You have been able to acquire some things — copper, gold, mud and muck! What a craze!''

Why should granny be so cross with me today and scold me for my indiscreet ventures? Let her scold, she is elder to me and has every right to do so, I thought, and awaited further scolding. Then she said, ''You have brought some copper pieces, haven't you? Give them to me. But you have hidden the gold piece.''

''No, not from you. If you don't chastise me I will tell you everything frankly. You remember standing on a granite bed that day on our way back from Hindugana? There I discovered an old well. I was keen to see if it would yield interesting things. I got it excavated a bit. I got so many things there - a necklace of gold, copper implements and what is more, parts of a human skeleton! I have brought the skull too. I was afraid to bring out the things. I have hidden most of them and brought only the copper bits first. I don't know how a woman's body got there! Anyway the skeleton was there. May be the necklace belongs to her.''

''Bring all the things to me. What does it matter even if there is a skull? Tomorrow when we die, if no one cremates our body our skulls too will be lying somewhere in the same way. Someone will kick us about. But, of course, it will not be us. The skull is ours so long as there is breath in the body.

After the breathing stops, why, even before that, the skull belongs to its creator."

Encouraged by her words, I went to the cowshed, brought the bag and placed it before her with all its contents. She thrust her hands into the bag; she must have felt every bit with her fingers. She pulled the bag nearer and placed the copper bits on top of it. For a pretty long time she was silent and then exclaimed, "This is quite strange!" I listened to her silently and attentively.

"These events took place many centuries ago; may be a thousand years ago or more. I am not certain when. But it must have been long long ago."

"Do you remember, I told you that I heard Vedic chants when I stood near the granite bed? I now hear the same verses. "Oh Indra, accept this; Indra, I bow to thee." These are the people who created for themselves gods like Indra, Varuna and Mitra. Not the Brahmins of today but of the distant past. These people worshipped fire daily and conducted sacrifices now and then. This means such sages lived in Moodoor! These people cultivated a bit of land and reared cattle, too. They did not like crowded towns. But their mind was bent on two things: they wanted heaven, as well as the pleasures of the earth. There won't be another world, without this world.

"Don't think they lived here for long. Probably the local people did not follow their beliefs. They did not have a Rama or a Krishna. Their gods were Indra, Varuna and Mitra. I don't know who this Mitra is. Then one day a different clan came to this region, a clan that had no faith in Vedic gods; nor did it believe in sacrifice. These newcomers harassed the early settlers a good deal. They would distrub their worship, they would steal the articles used in fire worship and cast them into wells.

So times changed and in the course of years the old gods were almost forgotten. Much later came another group of people, who hailed a sage of their own, wore yellow coloured cloth, shaved their heads, and carried begging bowls in their hands. I hear them chant but I cannot in the least understand their language. They stayed here for a long time. The local people began to worship a new god introduced by these yellow-robed ascetics. They talked of Dharma and they talked of a Chakra. They worshipped the figure of a person, seated and in deep meditation."

"Is it Buddha ?"

"How do you know ?"

"In ancient times, there lived a noble soul called Buddha. He preached a religion of his own. He disagreed with the teachings of the Brahmins."

"Then it must be he. They are 'chanting, 'Buddham saranam gachchami' and "Sangham saranam gachchami.' What does 'gachchami' mean ?"

"These phrases mean, 'I seek refuge in Buddha and I seek refuge in his institution.' "

"Oh, that is the avatar of Buddha ! Buddha figures in a mangala song of ours. He is spoken of as the naked one. But the idol these people are worshipping is not naked, it is clad. The story after this period is a bit cloudy. What happened later is unpleasant. It is a repetition of the story of the stone pavilion. There is the proverb - are the people mad or the Jatra mad ? In fact both are mad. The king who ruled over this region got tired of his old religion. Just as a man tired of his old cloth tries a new one, this king too adopted the religion of the newcomers. I mean the followers of Buddha. He took sides with them ; he began to scold the Brahmins and feed the yellow-robed ascetics. Many citizens followed their king, which is no wonder, and changed their god. I am not sorry for all that. But what does make me sad is the tragedy it brought about in the end.

"This skull belongs to a girl of a noble family, members of the fire-worshipping clan. She was a lovely damsel, about twenty or so. She had been married to a youth of the same caste. But he began to follow the new class of yellow-clad recluses. He began to abuse his own father-in-law. One day he shaved his head and became a follower of the new religion. This girl could not endure the suffering and committed suicide by jumping into a well. Her belief in her faith was not shaken and so she would not change her faith. Her husband had advised her to become a recluse too; but she did not renounce her faith.

"My boy, this is one thing which does not seem right to me. Not that women should not accept sanyasa, but 'vairagya' or dislike of worldly life must come by itself. It came to me without advice from others. But this type of sanyasa is not what I have experienced. This is a type of drilled and regimented renunciation. It originates from the idea that one has to keep oneself away from woman; association with her is considered a bondage. When both male and female become recluses, and live close to each other, what will the result be? If instead of committing suicide, she had turned to sanyasa, she would have become a hypocrite. That is all. It would have led to a life of duplicity ! Any day death is preferable to a hypocritical life !

"The funny thing is not that. The good woman died and after that nothing remained — neither virtue nor vice. A life had ended, that is all."

"That is all ?"

"That's what I think; that's all I believe."

"What happened next?"

"Then came another fancy dress show. The followers of this new religion did not remain here for long. Once again, the natives of this region changed their costumes. Then came a flood of gods—Durga, Siva, Vishnu, Narayana, Janardhana and so on, not in ones and twos but in scores and hundreds."

"Is Durga not an old Goddess?"

"Amma is the oldest; then came the linga. People created new myths about old gods, gave the old gods new names and bestowed new avatars on them. New gods came to satisfy the new taste of men. The people then built new temples and spires and pulled down edifices built for other gods; and then built new ones. They had such powerful gods, but they themselves split into different clans. What was the result? Instead of saying, 'We are the children of one God'' they broke humanity to pieces. They wrote a thousand legends; they quarrelled among themselves. So long as each life lived in harmony with other lives, there was peace and happiness. Instead of doing that, and fading away from the earth when one's turn came, a group of people appeared who taught others to kick away God's gift. 'I alone am right', 'God is on my side,' they shouted and went on quarrelling with their neighbours. Silly people. What an illusion! I know very well that you will report all these comments to your Sita. She will further be assured that this granny's brain is damaged. Let her say it. She sees things in one way, and I see them in a different way."

For some more time every day I went to the site of the excavated well. I tried to probe the mud to find pieces of bones and such other things. The sight of the bone would remind me of that poor woman and make me sad. How much mental strain she must have suffered in order to end her own life! How many temples, basadis, caves and pavilions are there, fallen or intact! Considering their number, what must have been the fate of those families that had to face such agonies, when some of their own members changed their faith? Only because our memories do not stretch so far back, we are happy today. Like each individual's forgetfulness, the forgetfulness of the race has kept us ignorant of the suffering of ancient times. It has also preserved for us so many hostile and conflicting ideas and symbols in such a way that we see no difference at all.

So far I had not taken out the necklace and cleaned it. When I rubbed it, it shone yellow and that was enough to convince me it was gold. Closer scrutiny would reveal its craftsmanship. If it had been any other occasion, I would have rushed to Sita with such a find, or given it to a goldsmith to melt and refashion it into an excellent necklace. After granny had narrated to me the tale of its owner, I dreaded to touch it. That piece of metal, in any new shape, adorning my wife's neck would only bring disturbing visions of a phallus turning into Siva, a Siva into a Kapali or a Bhairava! And that would cause regular hallucinations.

Now I can understand all that my granny sees, whenever she visits some old ruins or a temple. I am almost getting the taste of such an experience. The numerous distortions, twists and turns that ancient gods received as time passed make me think that there is one and only one name that can delight a mouth and that is "Amma." That one name will suffice for all time.

Days passed in this fashion. One day in summer my brother Narayana came with his pregnant wife and his brother-ini-law Anantharaya. One of Anantha's students, Ramadas, also came with him. I took the opportunity to take all the three men to the *Ghat wall* along with my old guide Annu Naika. With great enthusiasm I showed them the site I had visited the previous year. My brother remarked, "What is there so wonderful here?" On looking at the caverns his brother-in-law Anantharaya said, "True, an old-time cave; good enough for the ignorant people of an ancient age!" They sat there in one place; probably they thought they had seen enough. Only Ramadas, a lad who had not so far seen a forest, had enough enthusiasm to ask, "Is there anything else to see?" I took him to another rock wall, half-a-mile away. It had a rock projection beneath it and a huge cavity above it. We entered the natural cave and found ash strewn about its floor. In its wall was a room scooped in the rock by the ancient dwellers. "This is really wonderful!" exclaimed Ramadas at the sight of it.

"True, to have done this thousands of years ago, is a remarkable feat."

"This may belong to......?"

"There's nothing to show its age."

When we were looking around, we discovered a grove of trees in which lay a truncated icon carved in soap stone. It was a seated figure, but without the head. But yet, it looked like a meditating figure of Buddha.

Ramadas too said, "This surely was a Buddha! With the head it would have been an excellent piece of sculpture. Did Buddhists live in this corner of a mountain range?"

"They must have. Perhaps Buddhist monks lived in that very cave. It is said in earlier times there were colonies from here up to Moodoor village. Today it is one vast jungle."

Kudibi Annu reminded me that it was time to go. We rushed back to join the other two. Their voices were quite audible at that distance. We met them and started on our return journey. From then on till we reached home, the one voice that thundred in my ears was Anantharaya's. He was engaged in a discourse on the Bhagavad Gita, and often quoted verses from it.

By the time I reached home, I had begun to feel that if only this fellow had inflicted all his philosophy on my brother the previous year, it would have saved the money spent on Narayana's marriage. But there was still one danger. Now Narayana is married and his wife is with child. If after listening to the great sermons of his brother-in-law, Narayana renounces the world, what will be his wife's fate?

But I know my people well enough. All the sacred books like the Ramayana, the Mahabharatha, the Bhagavadgita and the Upanishads provide topics for sermonising to others. These gentlemen want others to imbibe all that knowledge and act according to the ancient precepts. The preachers themselves, however, are supposed to have already reached greater heights and so have no need of such sermons. Even in this preacher I found no lack of interest in physical and worldly needs.

For another twenty days or more, that is, till our friends left for thier own place, my home became a sort of 'mutt'. Anantharaya assumed the guru's role. My wife, who I thought was a simple woman, came and ardently listened to his words. Narayana, too, would ask him a question or two like one deeply concerned about renunciation. Ramadas would sit there, get bored soon and in a short time would slip away, or come and join me for a chat.

I am my granny's disciple and am disinclined to be Anantha's. Verses like 'Nainam chindanthi shastrani' or 'Yada yada hi dharmasya' were not new to me. I heard them long ago. Some of the verses I have heard make sense and some do not. I had discussed a few of them with my granny a long time ago.

Normally in our houses rarely is there loud talk or discussion. Very few people come to our house, and those who do, come to tell about their sorrows and joys. We reciprocate this. If at all there is any serious discussion, it takes place between us, husband and wife, and out of long experience we have evolved our own procedure for such occasions. If Sita raises her voice, I lower mine. On the other hand, if I raise my voice, she lowers hers and takes a later opportunity to shoot an arrow or two at me. But not so now. With Anantha and Narayana at home, the entire house, its yard and the surrounding area for a good distance, resounded with human voices. For some reason, whatever Anantharaya said had become gospel truth to Narayana. Last year this same Anantha seemed to be a shy man. Now things had changed. His sister was near him; so he had the advantage of close kinship. All these made him talk loudly, overbearingly and authoritatively. Conversations had became discourses. They were extensive but the content was always philosophical. Sitting in the verandah of our house, they discussed the Bhagavadgita in such detail as to tear it into shreds. To Sita, Anantharaya looked like a great commentator—a Sayana or Shankara. She would repeat snatches of what she had heard and then ask me, "What will your granny say to this?"

I could only say to her, "Great lady, if he is such a knowledgeable person, he had better go and put the question straight to granny. She may give him a reply." Though I would extricate myself from such situations in this way, some of the questions posed by her used to haunt me. I had sometimes told granny a few things that constantly bothered me, and sought her explanations. She did give me fine explanations and I could see that granny was not at all an ignoramus or a fool in such matters. Once she said "I am not unfamiliar with the Puranas and Bhagavadgita which your Narayana is quoting. Your father did not delve into such works. But your grandfather, who was no ordinary person, knew Sanskrit and was well-versed in the sacred texts. When Fate decreed that I was to be a widow, he wanted me to gain some peace of mind and read to me often from such texts and explained many of the ideas. That was what your grandfather, that is, my own brother, did for me.

"I have learned a great deal from him. When I came across conflicting ideas, I would ask him, 'What is this? Your Krishna Paramatma said one thing there and here he says something quite opposite. How can these two be reconciled?' Take for instance this one idea. It is supposed that such a lengthy discourse was given by Lord Krishna, isn't that true? Where? On the battlefield. When? After Dharma, Kaurava, and Satyaki had sounded their war conches ! Just when the battle was about to commence ! If Krishna went on with a long sermon to Arjuna on the battlefield, what did the others do? Did they sleep? Go home and return when the sermon was over? It sounds unbelievable. This Krishna said, "The atma does not die." He said that the atma or the soul alone is real and not the body. He said, 'You are not the one that is actually going to kill.' 'Do your duty,' he said, 'Don't seek the fruits thereof.' Now, think of all those statements.

It was the same Krishna who also said, 'If you die in the battle in an attempt to kill your enemy, you will go to heaven.' But he himself told you not to yearn for the fruits of your actions! He told you that passion and anger are evil. He asked Arjuna to kill his enemy. He stated that the body was an illusion. Yet, it was he who ordered the destruction of the enemy's body. Nothing can stain the soul—that was what he said. 'If you don't carry on the war, you are going to suffer ignominy' he also declared. It is hard to swallow all these contradictory statements. They really are clever words; but I cannot believe them."

"Did not Sri Krishna Paramatma himself say these things?"

"Your Rama and Krishna are babes of yesterday, according to me. All our wise ancestors did not say what they thought was true; they thrust their ideas into the throats of their gods, and saw to it that they were spewed out on mankind. I told you of Kapali worship; much of it is ugly and obscene. My brother read out to me authorities for such deeds too. They were supposed to have been told by Siva to his great lady Parvathi! I have no faith in these avatars. Who is not an avatar? You are one; I am one. All of us are Amma's children; it is not Nara and Narayana alone; worms, insects, stones and dirt are His creations, they are all parts of His being.

"I will mention to you one pertinent point, which I can easily see since I am a woman. In the Gita, you find a remark that if women become wicked, races will become mixed. A god who created both sexes should know that both will have to become wicked to go astray. To the author who put those words into the mouth of Arjuna, the 'male' was an innocent being. This document is a jumble of thoughts, which occurred to ten different persons, but they were all put into the mouth of one mythical Krishna. The trick was to make it authoritative by showing that the Paramatma himself uttered them."

"Forget all this. You always say 'Amma' and 'Amma'. Is she at least real ?

"She is as real as you and I. She is real so long as we live. We do realize that something much greater than all of us exists. What that is, we cannot fathom. But yet when we see this vast creation, we are compelled to think that there is something beyond it all. Our ancestors gave that something a name. That was 'Amma'. To children, 'Amma' is the biggest thing in life. She gives us birth. We don't know what caused us to be born, but believing that some such power exists, we seek it addressing it as 'Amma'. We worship it and adore it. I see nothing wrong in such an attitude. But the pity is, all our behaviour ends in adoration and worship. We wave arathi, break coconuts and beg her for so many things. Has that Amma no other children? She has crores and crores of them. Why not live with the rest of her children in harmony and take that itself as a mode of worship? Why should we imagine that we alone know the truth and that the faith of others is false? Why should we think that our god alone is great and that of others is inferior? A mother cannot bear the sight of any of her children in tears. See what happened to that young Brahmin girl? She thought she had to end her life!"

I have, at different times, carried on similar conversations with my granny. Once or twice that boy Ramadas also came and sat near me. Probably, he reported to Anantharaya a few comments of granny's. As a result, occasionally Anantharaya came to granny and asked, 'How do you do?' Ajji simply answered, 'I am as you see me......and may go on like this for some four days."

"Why four days! You should live for forty years more," Anantha commented, with the desire to get into an argument.

"If you can also tell me what I should do for forty years I may think of it," replied granny, and smiled.

Another time, when I was sitting with granny, Narayana, Ramadas and Anantha also came and sat by our side. Only they knew why they were there. Granny never talked to them and my conversation with her came to an abrupt end. Narayana then brought up a point, which they could have discussed by themselves. He said to his friend, "So in your opinion a sanyasin's life is far superior to that of a householder, isn't it? Family entails bondage. I, too, think so."

For no reason at all I said, "If you had come to that conclusion last year alone, we could have saved a lot of money we spent for the marriage." Anantharaya could have kept silent at this point, but probably he wanted to have a fling at granny. So he said, "Ajjamma, how does it sound to you? You are an aged person with a good deal of experience. That is why we came to hear you."

"About what?"

"What we were discussing just now or any such thing as *samsara*, truth, *dharma* or *Maya*."

"I know what you have in mind. You think *samsara* is disgusting and sex is obscene. There are many such persons in this world. Even some of our ancestors thought that way. We accept such beliefs and think along the same lines. Only, one has to be sincere in such matters. One should try to live according to the principles one believes to to be right. What is the use of talking without that element of sincerity? You may think that woman is dirty. If so, keep away from her. But on the other hand, should you engage in the same sport with a male instead of with a female? Why should such frauds talk philosophy? This ajji is no blind person. She can see with her physical eyes and her mind's eye. How can you, who have come from Shimoga to enjoy sex with a boy, talk so tall about renunciation and all that? It is too much. Which god do you want to please?

"If passion and differences of sex are dirty things in life He who bestowed them upon His creatures would know why He did so, what purpose they were meant to fulfil. If sex were so dirty he would not have created differences of sex even in flowers; if sex is His creation. You need not take the trouble of testing me. Set right your own conduct first."

Ramadasa, who was sitting by my side, hung down his head in shame. Tears trickled down his face and he quietly walked away.

Luckily whatever disaster might have followed was averted by my son Kittanna; he was shouting. "Daddy, food is ready, tell everyone to come." So I hurried away.

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